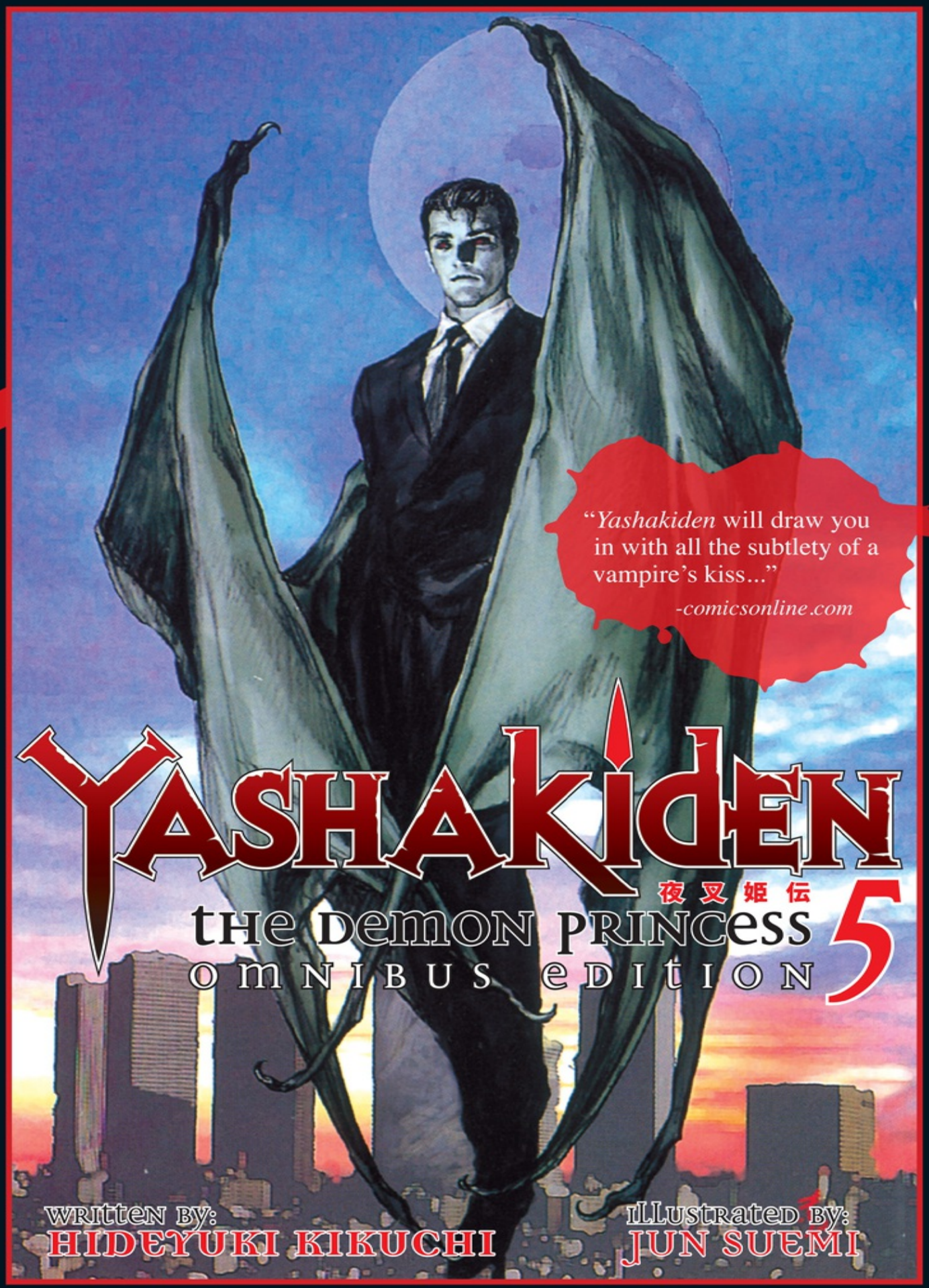
DMP
DIGITAL MANGA PUBLISHING



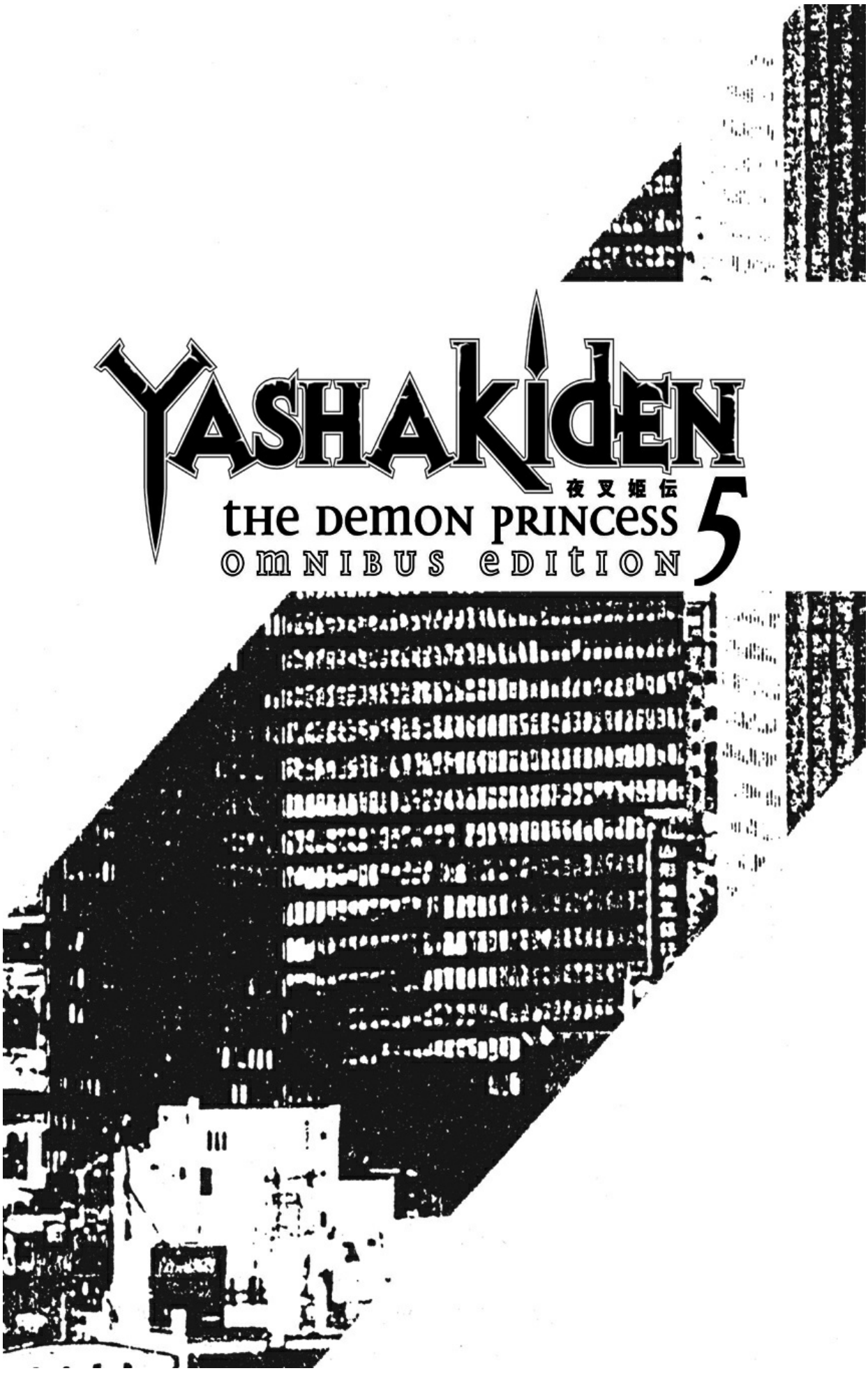
"*Yashakiden* will draw you in with all the subtlety of a vampire's kiss..."
-comicsonline.com

YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝

THE DEMON PRINCESS
OMNIBUS EDITION 5

WRITTEN BY:
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

ILLUSTRATED BY:
JUN SUEMI


YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝
THE DEMON PRINCESS 5
OMNIBUS EDITION

Author's Bio

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in 1949 in the city of Choshi in Chiba Prefecture. He graduated from Aoyama University. His auspicious debut came in 1982 with the publication of *Demon City Shinjuku*.

In 1985, the classic *Makaikou* was published in three volumes, elevating him to the ranks of bestselling authors. Since then, his supernatural thrillers have sold over 6.5 million copies, and this explosive enthusiasm shows no sign of stopping.

Now, after three years of work, Hideyuki Kikuchi has poured his heart and soul into the conclusion of this epic series.

YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝

THE DEMON PRINCESS 5
OMNIBUS EDITION

Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by
JUN SUEMI

English Translation by
Eugene Woodbury

DMP
DIGITAL MANGA PUBLISHING
Los Angeles

Yashakiden: The Demon Princess Vol. 5 Omnibus Edition

Yashakiden:The Demon Princess vol.5 - Yashakiden 4 (c) Hideyuki Kikuchi 1997. Originally published in Japan in 2007 by SHODENSHA Publishing Co.,LTD. English translation copyright (c) 2012 by DIGITAL MANGA, Inc. All other material (c) 2012 by DIGITAL MANGA, Inc. All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the copyright holders. Any likeness of characters, places, and situations featured in this publication to actual persons (living or deceased), events, places, and situations are purely coincidental. All characters depicted in sexually explicit scenes in this publication are at least the age of consent or older. The DMP logo is (tm) of DIGITAL MANGA, Inc.

Written by Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrated by Jun Suemi

English Translation by Eugene Woodbury.

English Edition Published by:

DIGITAL MANGA PUBLISHING

A division of DIGITAL MANGA, Inc.

1487 W 178th Street, Suite 300

Gardena, CA 90248

USA

www.dmpbooks.com

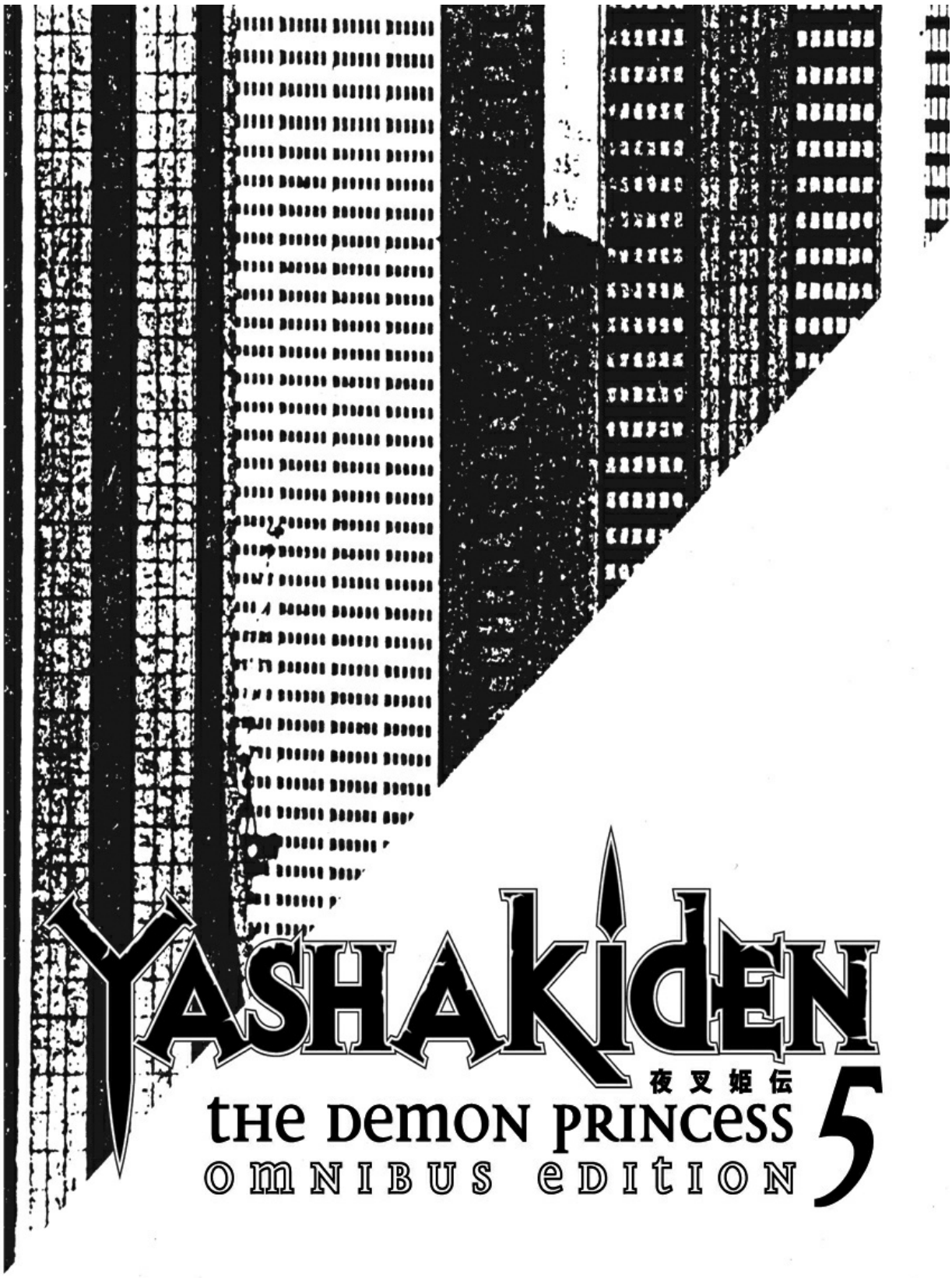
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available Upon Request

First Edition: Feb 2012

ISBN-13: 978-1-56970-198-0

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada

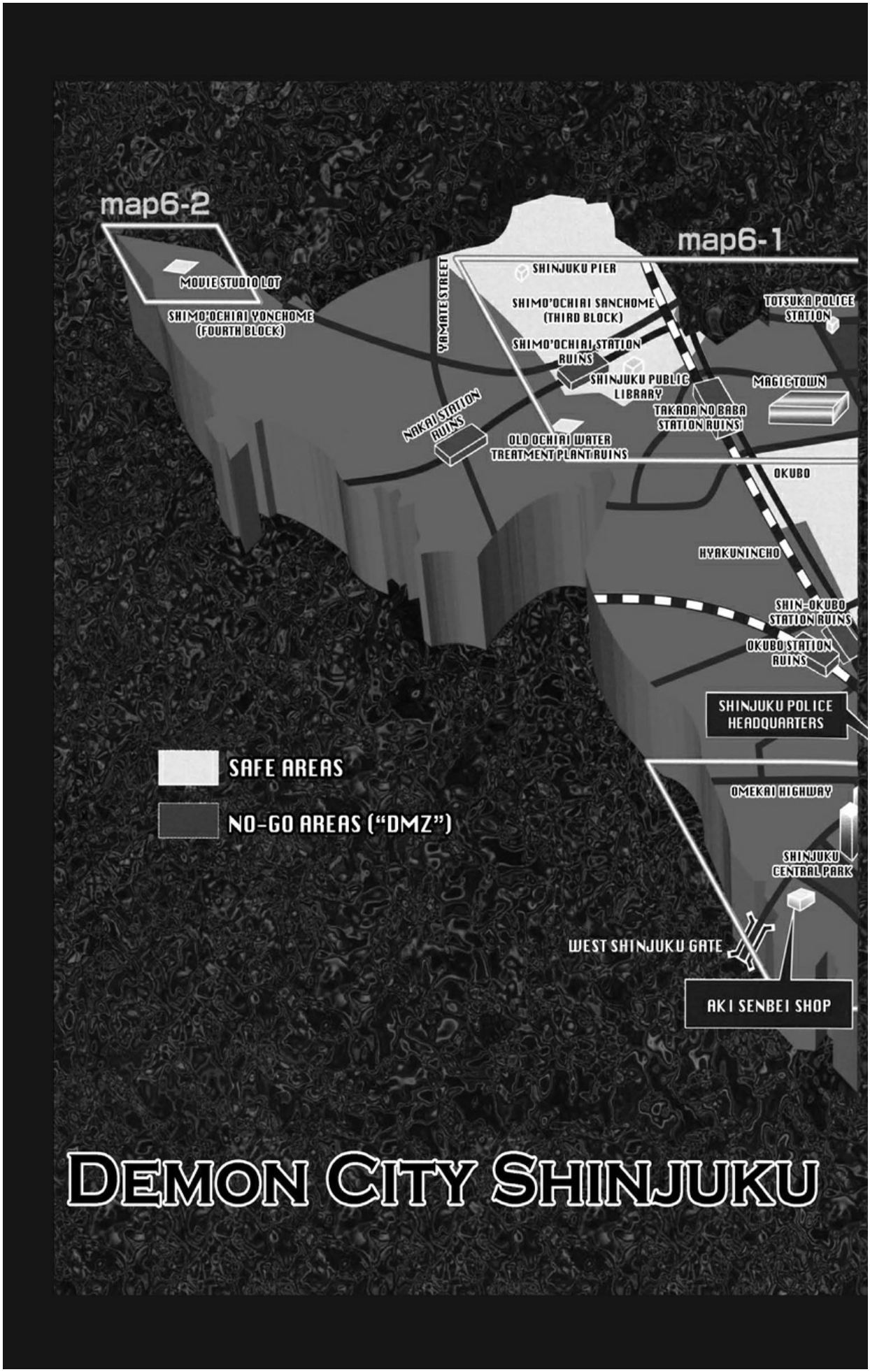


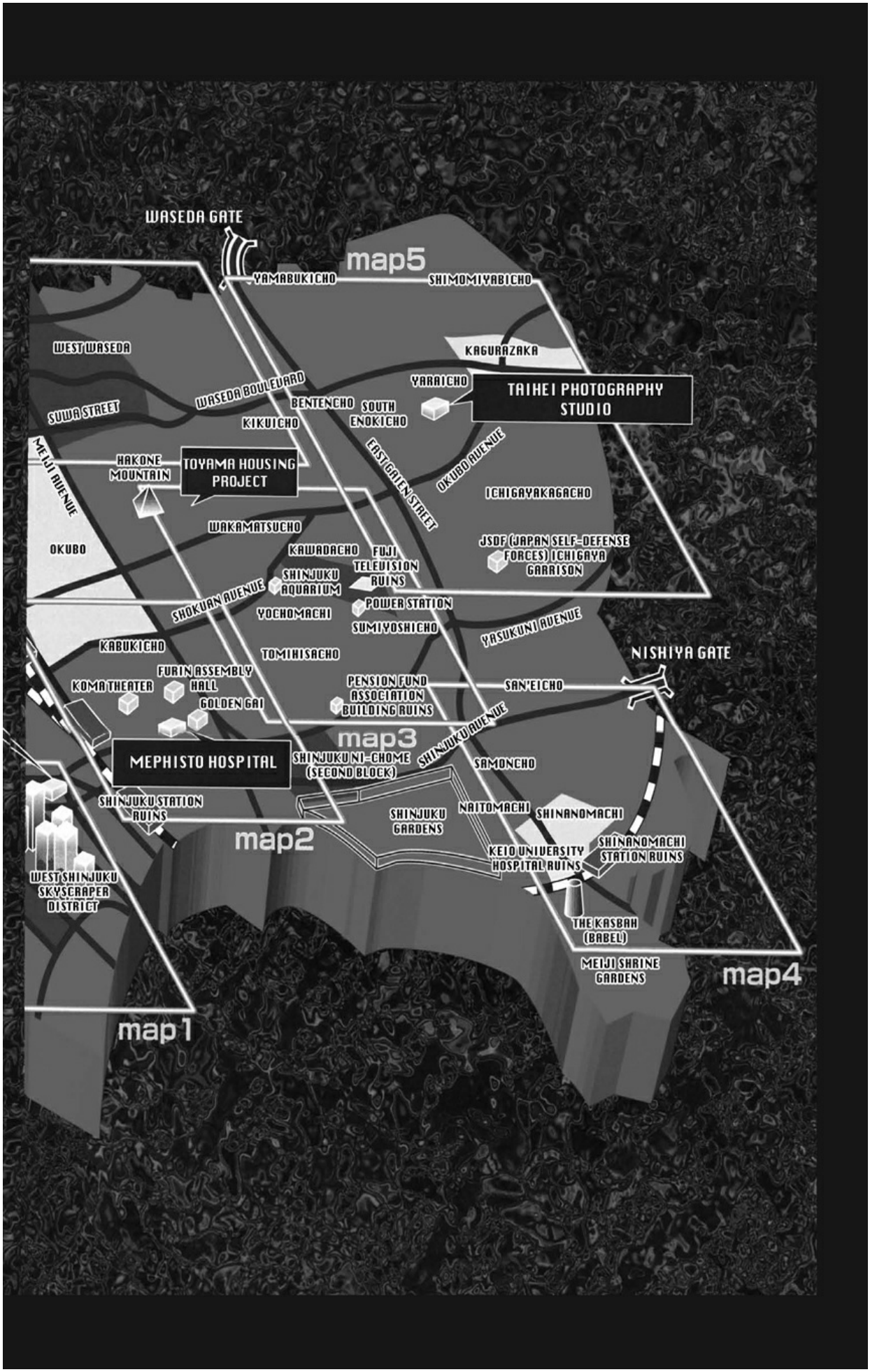
YASHAKIDEN

夜叉姫伝

THE DEMON PRINCESS 5

OMNIBUS EDITION


map6-2
map6-1
MOVIE STUDIO LOT
SHIMO'OCHIAI YONCHOME (FOURTH BLOCK)
YAMATE STREET
SHINJUKU PIER
SHIMO'OCHIAI SANCHOME (THIRD BLOCK)
TOTSUKA POLICE STATION
SHIMO'OCHIAI STATION RUINS
SHINJUKU PUBLIC LIBRARY
MAGIC TOWN
TAKADA NO BABA STATION RUINS
NAKAI STATION RUINS
OLD OCHIAI WATER TREATMENT PLANT RUINS
OKUBO
HYAKUNINCHO
SHIN-OKUBO STATION RUINS
OKUBO STATION RUINS
SHINJUKU POLICE HEADQUARTERS
SAFE AREAS
NO-GO AREAS ("DMZ")
OMEKAI HIGHWAY
SHINJUKU CENTRAL PARK
WEST SHINJUKU GATE
AKI SENBEI SHOP
DEMON CITY SHINJUKU


WASEDA GATE
map5
YAMABUKICHO
SHIMOMIYABICHO
WEST WASEDA
KAGURAZAKA
YARAICHO
TAIHEI PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO
WASEDA BOULEVARD
SUWA STREET
BENTENCHO
SOUTH ENOKICHO
KIKUICHO
MEIJI AVENUE
HAKONE MOUNTAIN
TOYAMA HOUSING PROJECT
EAST GAIEN STREET
OKUBO AVENUE
ICHIGAYAKAGACHO
WAKAMATSUCHO
OKUBO
KAWADACHO
FUJI TELEVISION RUINS
JSDF (JAPAN SELF-DEFENSE FORCES) ICHIGAYA GARRISON
SHINJUKU AQUARIUM
SHOKUAN AVENUE
POWER STATION
YOCHOMACHI
SUMIYOSHICHO
YASUKUNI AVENUE
KABUKICHO
TOMIHISACHO
NISHIYA GATE
FURIN ASSEMBLY HALL
KOMA THEATER
PENSION FUND ASSOCIATION BUILDING RUINS
SAN'EICHO
GOLDEN GAI
map3
SHINJUKU AVENUE
MEPHISTO HOSPITAL
SHINJUKU NI-CHOME (SECOND BLOCK)
SAMONCHO
SHINJUKU STATION RUINS
NAITOMACHI
SHINANOMACHI
SHINJUKU GARDENS
map2
KEIO UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL RUINS
SHINANOMACHI STATION RUINS
WEST SHINJUKU SKYSCRAPER DISTRICT
THE KASBAH (BABEL)
MEIJI SHRINE GARDENS
map4
map1

Main Characters

Setsura Aki

The manager and owner of a Demon City *senbei* shop and P.I. agency. A handsome man with magical powers literally at his fingertips, he fights his enemies with strands of sub-micron thin "devil wire."

Mephisto

It is rumored that the "Demon City Physician," as beautiful as he is feared, can bring even the dead back to life.

Princess

A gorgeous Chinese vampire who has wandered the world for four thousand years in search of a safe refuge for herself and her followers.

Kikiou

Princess's principal retainer, this mysterious old warlock desires to subjugate all of Demon City Shinjuku.

Shuuran

A vampire and servant of Princess, she can fashion killer vampire dolls from her own blood—and was herself killed by the Doll Girl.

Ryuuki

This vampire general from ancient China plays the mesmerizing ghost koto *Silent Night* and has a powerful *qi* at his command.

Takako Kanan

A college student specializing in ancient Chinese history, she is swept into supernatural conflict because of her obsession with the mysterious “Daji” from the Hsia Dynasty.

Yakou

A vampire who lives in Demon City’s Toyama housing project, he is the grandson of the Elder, who was defeated and killed by Princess.

Tonbeau Nuvenberg

One very fat witch, and currently a resident of Demon City’s Magic Town, she’s the younger sister of the Czech Republic’s greatest wizardess, Galeen Nuvenberg.

The Doll Girl

Together with an obnoxious raven, the surprisingly powerful Doll Girl serves the witch Galeen Nuvenberg.

Mayor Kajiwara

The mayor of Demon City Shinjuku, he’s pulling out all the stops to keep things from getting any weirder than they already are.

The Story So Far

The immortal vampire known as Princess is quickly turning Demon City Shinjuku into a vampire metropolis. Setsura infiltrates her manor house alone and is met by the puppet paramours and picture soldiers of Princess's servant, the powerful warlock Kikiou. He is saved in the nick of time by the wizardess Galeen Nuvenberg, but only at the cost of her own life.

Meanwhile, fearing a vampire apocalypse, the Japanese government plans to hit Shinjuku with a nuclear bomb supplied by the U.S. military. Except that in a befitting irony, Prime Minister Kongodai himself has become one of Princess's slaves. In order to retrieve the missile abort codes from him and save Shinjuku, Setsura must once again face off against Princess, this time on her home ground.

Part One: Monster Playground

Chapter One

Princess ended her pronouncement. A sly smile stole across her face.

“What’s she talking about?”

“Who the hell is this bitch?”

Submachine guns glittered in the hands of the bodyguards. The weapons had ten-inch barrels and bores that were only an eighth of an inch, but they could empty a magazine of seventy rounds in 3.5 seconds, delivering a hail of armor-piercing rounds that guaranteed instant death. The safeties were off.

“Stop!” Prime Minister Kongodai barked. As the bodyguards reacted in amazement, he continued, “No shooting! This person is my—patron.”

“Oh, how sweet,” Setsura said, which only further confused the guards.

“But—sir—”

“No means no! Put away your weapons!”

The barrels of the guns bobbed up and down, reflecting the consternation of the men carrying them.

Princess turned around. “Let’s be on our way.”

She strode into the mist like a phantom. Setsura and Takako

came next. Kongodai followed up the rear.

The guards ran after him and grabbed him by the arms. They were both over six feet tall, weighed over a hundred and eighty pounds and were experts in hand-to-hand fighting. Either of them could take out a two-hundred-fifty-pound sumo wrester in a full-bore roid rage.

And yet the paunchy prime minister, half a head shorter, dragged them along without slowing, calmly following the beautiful silhouette in front of him. They redoubled their efforts and shouted in his ears to halt, but he didn't slow his pace.

The other two guards positioned themselves in front and in back of him. One pushed against his chest, the other wrapped his arms around his legs. Despite their best efforts, the prime minister shook himself free and kept going, his vacant eyes burning with unabashed puppy dog love—the one thing his bodyguards took no notice of.

"He's not stopping."

"Sir, you can ask for my resignation later!"

The guard in front made a fist and drove it into his belly with all his might. The hand sank into his stomach down to the wrist. It should have knocked the breath clean out of him. The prime minister did not so much as hiccup.

"Get his legs!" cried the one on the left.

Setsura and the Princess had already faded into the fog.

"No! That's the prime minister!"

Ignoring the warning, the guard who'd first grabbed him from the

left aimed his gun downward. The rest leapt backwards as the muzzle spit fire. The depleted uranium rounds tore the prime minister's knees to shreds. Shards of fabric and flesh flew like confetti.

The needle-like cartridges showered onto the ground, clattering and pinging around them. In front of their amazed eyes, the bloody legs kept walking as if nothing was out of the ordinary. The man's slight frame had faded to a dusky shadow when the bodyguards finally came to their senses and chased after him.

Like marionettes pulled along by invisible strings.

The mist burned away. Setsura found himself standing under a bright sun. They had entered Princess's kingdom. He looked around. Princess and Takako were in front of him. Beyond them extended a row of squat, flat buildings.

The old and crumbling blanched bricks of adobe houses. Their decrepit state was clear at a glance, even without seeing the cracks in the walls and the holes in the roofs. Some dusty Chinese village from a time long past. A slight breeze stirred Setsura's hair.

"Kongodai and his retainers are somewhere in that village. You have seven hours to find them."

A thin smile rose to Princess's lips as she spoke, though Setsura had turned his face towards the ruins. His shadowed features, as if distilled out of the night, were a befitting addition to the darkness of the town. On this field flooded with light, he shone like a statue carved by wind and lightning.

For a moment, Princess couldn't tear her eyes away.

"Where is this?" he asked, taking note of the river and the surrounding mountains.

"The remains of a village occupied long before the Hsia Dynasty. No humans live there now. In their place are strange and curious creatures. You'd better hurry up and find the prime minister and the rest of them before they become their next meal. I'll wait beneath that pine tree. When you return, our little game will be over. If you wish to save Shinjuku, if you truly value the lives of your compatriots—those seven hours will fly by in a flash."

Her pearl-like lips bent at a cruel angle. "But remain here and you and Takako may rest easy. Put off this silly saving-the-world business and become my slave. If you do—"

"Well, I'm off then," Setsura said, stretching his limbs. A vein pulsed slowly on Princess's forehead. "Look after Kanan-san for me."

"No, she's going with you."

"She'll kind of get in the way."

"All the more reason to. Be sure she doesn't stray from your side for an instant. There's nothing the current residents of that village like more than the smell of a soft, pliant woman."

Setsura sensed it too. Until this moment, nothingness had ruled over these ruins. But now, here and there, squirming signs of danger arose and were growing louder. By himself, he could have improvised a suitable response. But together with Takako—half

turned into a vampire and lusting after his blood—getting a hold of Kongodai while fending off the inhabitants of this place would prove chancy at best.

"So that's a definite no?"

"You'd better get going."

"What a miserly little minx."

She stared back at him. She, who had watched over four thousand years of Chinese history and the rise and fall of kingdoms long before that, had borne every insult the human language could concoct—except for that concatenation of words.

Miserly. Stunned, her mind worked through the meanings. Her face, like a pale peach, flushed with anger. Drawing and quartering him right then and there would not begin to satisfy her.

But with Takako Kanan by his side, he strolled along the road to the ruins as if he'd just wished her a good day. In no way did he look like a man bearing the fate of the world upon his shoulders.

"You'll be back, Setsura Aki." Princess didn't speak, but her movements communicated every thought. "You will live. You will fight for Demon City and the refuse who live there. You will lose everything and come back here precisely at noon. Without the prime minister. Holding onto nothing but the darkness of everlasting despair. *That* is what you will bow down to. You will return to me seeking your final salvation."

Princess screamed with laughter. The wind blew, carrying grit and sand into the air. Touched by the sound of her voice, it fell back to

the earth like rain, as if it too wished to flee the presence of such merciless glee.

Setsura stopped at the earthworks surrounding the town. At the time, the builders of this defensive perimeter—three feet high, a foot thick and plastered with clay—must have viewed it as quite an accomplishment.

Passing through a gate—all that was left were the round oak timbers—Setsura entered the village. Yellow dirt scurried past his feet like a fleeing animal.

"Searching for people is my specialty," he said to himself.

He cast out his devil wires—from hands that the world's most accomplished sculptor would wish to spring to life and like Pygmalion receive his kiss. The slightest movement of that shadow-like white fist, and the titanium wire sprang out as a sword, an auger, as eyes or ears or infinitely long fingers.

Invisible to the wind, glimmering now and then under the sun like gossamer as it prowled the empty streets and houses. No one on God's green earth could hide from this beautiful seeker.

A sharp pain radiated back through the tips of his fingers. In a flash, Setsura discarded the thread and switched to another. He didn't cast it out, but examined his fingers. Red drops beaded on the skin. On this young man's fair flesh, even blood budded like a flower.

"Grabbed, bitten, yanked without being cut by my threads—that woman said this was a wild and woolly world she did not enter

blithely. Seems she was telling the truth."

Setsura raised his fingers to his lips, stopping just short. Casting a disagreeable glance at the beads of blood, he retrieved a handkerchief with his left hand and wiped them off.

"Please," said a gasping voice.

Setsura turned around and frowned. Takako stood there in a blouse and jeans, bathed in the white light. Her skin was the texture of wax. Only her lips were red.

Another gasp. Her upper lip curled back of its own accord, exposing the white teeth and gums. Her tongue peeked out, as if pushing aside the long fangs.

"Please." A trembling hand reached toward his chest. "Please. Your fingers—what a pleasant aroma."

"Sorry, you'll have to take a rain check."

As he spoke, her arms dropped back down again as if bound together. An invisible strand of steel slackened at times, stiffened at times, and kept Takako entranced. Otherwise, in her current state, hungering for blood, he could not have brought her along.

"Please, pretty please," she pleaded, grinding her teeth in thirst and hunger. In her half-demon state the seductiveness of that expression, of her writhing body, was beyond description.

"I suppose there's an upside to your being here. But no matter how I look at things, you're going to be a handful. What do I do with you?" For the young *senbei* shop owner, who seemed to have been

born with that languid look on his face, this was an understatement to say the least. “Leave you here, or hide you someplace?”

Except there was no telling what was lurking in this village. Should she be cornered by one of the monsters, the fate of even a half-vampire would be the same as any frail young woman.

He had no choice but to take her along for the ride.

The two of them wandered down the streets of the village. That unearthly sense rained down on them—from the dark alleys between the houses, from the shadows behind the fences, from the rooftops—of being watched by many eyes.

Setsura cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed in a loud voice, “Hey, Mr. Prime Minister! You around here somewhere?”

The aura of the beasts watching and waiting swept through the village like a whirlwind, suffused with tense loathing and mindless murder. Even Princess and Kikiou would have been taken aback by its intensity.

As far as Setsura was concerned, this was the logical thing to do. The genial young man possessed a state of mind a world removed from the usual fears and stresses of humanity at large. But more than that was the ability to not care a whit what anybody else thought about him.

Having been brought to a place like this against their will by Princess, the prime minister and his bodyguards should surely want to escape as soon as possible. Setsura was confident they wouldn’t have cause to avoid him. Making as much noise as possible was the

fastest way to reach them.

His devil wires weren't working. He strained his ears.

An answer came: the report of a gun. From the northeast. Nothing else. A single, clear shot.

"That was quick."

With a carefree smile he wrapped an arm around Takako and soared onto the roof of a nearby house. No sooner had he landed but one of the remaining tiles jarred loose. It sailed into the air, suddenly reversed course, and returned to its original position.

Yelling was one thing, allowing a tile to uselessly fall quite another. That was the way his mind worked. As if sensing something, he cast a suspicious glance at where the tile lay. Seeing nothing amiss, he directed his gaze elsewhere.

Beyond the houses—all rising to about the same elevation—the horizon was filled with forests and hills. Human figures appeared and disappeared among the woods and rises. They were coming this way.

"Found you."

Setsura tapped Takako in the solar plexus. Picking out a tree in the thick curtain of green surrounding the town, he flung a devil wire around one limb.

Chapter Two

Not just the four bodyguards, but Prime Minister Kongodai as well was gripped by a state of high anxiety.

Disappearing into the fog while being manipulated by Princess was one thing. But when the skies cleared, Princess was nowhere to be seen. All around them were verdant hills and forests.

Coming to his senses, he cried out, “Where the hell are we?”

None of his bodyguards had a clue either. Before being engulfed in the mists, it’d been a dark summer night, the darkest hours before dawn. Now the bright sunlight pouring down stung their eyes. The sheer improbability of their surroundings sent cold chills down their backs.

Squad leader Sejika said, “In any case, let’s make our way back to civilization. Hey, Kume, climb up that hill and take a look around.”

Kume darted up the rise. He pointed and called back, “Houses not far off!”

“Sounds like a stroke of good luck.” Without waiting for Kume to rejoin them, Sejika ordered them forward. He loaded a magazine of five 20 mm missiles into his gun. The weapon weighed about three pounds and gave him a ton of confidence.

Sejika flashed a cool look at the prime minister. However curiously the man had been behaving these last few days, there

wasn't any question about the past few hours, not after he called that beautiful woman his "patron." She clearly had him under a spell. Once they escaped from this strange world, the next stop was the funny farm and the men in the white lab coats.

That was when he heard the prime minister's name being called out.

"Fire off a shot."

Mogami pointed the muzzle of his gun skyward and looked at Sejika for confirmation. The flash of fire and loud report followed Sejika's nod.

That young man's voice. Just thinking about it gave him pause. *He* was as handsome as *she* was beautiful. She was definitely the enemy. He couldn't imagine *he* was an ally. He was part of the trap they'd been lured into. Though the stoically repressed feelings aroused by the young man's countenance were a species apart from what he felt towards *her*, this battle-hardened bodyguard couldn't deny the similarities.

He had to wonder if he was alone in this. Making no effort to hide the sordid thoughts flitting through his mind, he stole a look at the faces of the others.

"You okay, Sejika-san?" Yoshimura asked behind him. "That guy —he's one of the bad guys, you think?"

"Probably. But do the bad guys make such a commotion when they're looking for somebody? And identify the prime minister by name?"

Yoshimura looked around with a pained expression. “Where the hell is this, anyway? And who is that guy? Shit, everything’s gone nuts.”

“Keep it to yourself in front of the PM!” Sejika hissed under his breath. He nodded his head at the prime minister, who had turned towards the sound of his name. Though the man still looked out to sea, Sejika sensed determination in his profile.

Kume caught up with them to repeat that beyond the forest was a village.

“All right. Let’s go. No matter what, make sure nothing happens to the prime minister.”

They pushed through the green foliage, the prime minister in the middle, Kume in front, Yoshimura and Mogami to the right and left. Sejika brought up the rear.

After ten paces or so, they started to relax. Sunlight and a gentle wind caressed the trees and meadow. The light itself had a scent about it, perhaps coming from the forest Kume had seen. White flowers covered the sides of the hills like snow.

“We should meet up with him soon. Regardless of how the conversation goes, stay on your guard and be prepared to take whatever steps are necessary.”

Despite the warning tone in his voice, Sejika couldn’t help feeling more and more at ease. After climbing some hills and detouring around several more, they found their route blocked by a grassy rise.

“Past this is the forest,” Kume said with an easy smile.

It didn’t take much time getting to the top. Prime Minister Kongodai reached the summit. Slowed by the soft ground underfoot, Sejika followed several yards behind. Coming to where the rest stood staring down at the slope opposite, he said, “What’s up?”

He pushed past Mogami and looked himself. “What the hell?” At the foot of the smooth slope before them, the hilly terrain went on and on.

“What’s going on here?” Prime Minister Kongodai asked blankly.

“The forest was definitely there!” said Kume, paling a bit under the fierce gaze of his colleagues.

“Yeah, right,” snapped Mogami. “You can’t tell the fucking difference between east and west.”

Sejika gestured for him to shut it. “I don’t think so. This is that woman’s doing.”

“Unbelievable,” said Kume. “You mean she can change the geography at will?” Considering that Kume was the least likely to question what he’d seen with his own two eyes, this was good confirmation of the strangeness of the situation.

“Not long ago, we were in Tokyo and it was night. It’s more like the earth moved beneath our feet,” countered Sejika.

He shifted his attention to what the rest of them were staring at. Stone pillars and towers and battlements. They loomed darkly against the green, covered with moss, weather-beaten and falling

down, like a sullen stain on the canvas of the clean bright day.

"Looks like a graveyard," said Yoshimura, and the rest were seized by a sense of foreboding that that was too tidy a metaphor not to be true.

"Somebody must be watching. So let's take their motives at face value."

Sejika tightened his grip on his gun. His palms were still dry. That gave him confidence for his next move. With a glance at Kongodai, he planted his left elbow against his hip. His wristwatch shot a needle-thin hypodermic into the prime minister's neck. He spasmed once, but didn't fall down.

"From now on, follow my orders," Sejika said in a voice that was more an admonishment than a threat.

"Understood."

Kongodai's answer was as expected.

When it came to his flesh and bones, the prime minister was no different than the average Joe. In order to bring him back alive, Sejika was authorized to use mind control drugs. For a period of approximately twenty-four hours or until the antidote was administered, Prime Minister Kongodai would follow his directions as obediently as a robot.

Surveying the stunned looks on the faces of his subordinates, he said, "Let's go," and jerked his chin at the base of the hill.

Their steps fell heavier now. The breezes bore a different odor.

The heavy stones—as if to prevent the dead from rising from their graves—surrounded them.

"It stinks," said Yoshimura, wrinkling his nose.

Mogami said with a touch of false bravado, "It's a graveyard. Goes with the territory."

"Never been in a cemetery that smells like this," Yoshimura shot back. "My grandfather on my mom's side is a Buddhist priest. It's something I know something about. Their cemetery is clean and well kept. People in the neighborhood even have picnics there. This place smells like a graveyard that's been dug up, and I'm talking a graveyard where they bury the bodies. We're talking rot and worms and the lot. Very ripe. Quite the sight. When they disinter the graves, the caskets break, the corpses fall out and the like. The decomposing clothes tear and the bones and organs stick out. They move, you know. Ripples in skin. The worms crawling in and out, tens of thousands of them. They completely take the place of the organs. I saw it once. My granddad told me that when you see the little critters, the guts are like clay. Means they haven't digested all the innards. But if you open a grave after letting 'em ferment for a few decades—"

"Okay, okay, we get the damned point," snapped Sejika, grimacing. "It's not killing anybody. Put up with it. Keep on your toes."

The ability to focus the mind was a particular tool of their trade. They had to keep their eyes ahead of them while remaining aware of what was going on to the right, the left, and behind them. Fingers

rested heavily on light triggers, just a gust of wind away from turning this place into a kill zone.

They sensed nothing alive moving. The sunlight lit up the moss-covered gravestones in a picturesque glow.

Without any apparent reason, Kume stopped.

Without any apparent reason, Mogami stopped.

Without any apparent reason, Yoshimura stopped.

Without any apparent reason, Sejika stopped.

Kume kept looking straight ahead. Mogami turned to the left, Yoshimura to the right, Sejika behind him. Casual movements.

And turned back. Hearing the surprised reaction of the other three, Kume glanced over his shoulder.

Sejika leapt forward. At first he thought nothing was wrong. And then noticed that the prime minister was gone. Mogami kicked the ground. Yoshimura raked at the air.

“Not here,” said Kume.

“What’s that?” Sejika shouted, ducking behind the shadow of a nearby pillar.

A bright line of light parted the undergrowth, whistled through the air, and ricocheted off the pillars. A fearsome-looking, foot-long dart. Based on the sound of the impact and vector of the shot, it wasn’t hand-thrown.

“Probably a blowgun!” Sejika shifted to a gravestone on his right

and called out, “Everybody safe?”

“I’m okay,” said Kume.

“Nothing wrong,” said Mogami.

“I’m fine,” said Yoshimura.

“Cover me,” Sejika barked. “Ninety-degree sweep, thirty-five rounds. Once you’ve finished firing, get clear of the cemetery. We’ll look for the prime minister later.”

“Roger,” the other three chorused.

Then a groan. It was Mogami.

“What happened?”

“Got hit in the shoulder. A dart from above!”

“That’s crazy! What kind of a blowgun—”

Sejika looked up as something glittered and streaked straight down at him. With a grunt he flung himself to the side. The lines of light grazed the tip of his nose. The ground he’d been standing on turned into a pincushion. Hiding wouldn’t do any good. Their only option was to attack.

Cradling the gun against his hip, he opened fire. Orange flame punctuated the white sunlight. The armor-piercing bullets turned the stone pillars and gravestones into pumice. One square shot cracked a boulder in two. The rest turned it to rubble, like stepping on a piece of rock candy.

His subordinates fired at will. Counting the recoils to thirty-five,

Sejika yelled, “Charge!”

They marched into the cemetery, concentrating three points of fire. Reports from three guns, and three pairs of boots. They weren’t afraid of what unknown creatures would spring out from behind the gravestones. But they were hardly without any concerns. Sejika passed the last gravestone. Beyond the cemetery was an endless meadow, with nothing that might offer any cover.

“Clear!” He hit the deck. The sound of running feet stopped. He twisted around. His eyes widened. He was the only one there. “Kume! Mogami! Yoshimura!”

No answer came.

The graveyard was as still as death. Sejika scanned the horizon with bloodshot eyes. He finally got to his feet. The prime minister and his men had disappeared. He couldn’t very well go running off by himself.

He reflexively hit the release with his left hand, dumped the empty magazine and inserted a fresh, seventy-round magazine. Four people had vanished in succession. It was enough to amp up the terror to an unbearable level, but Sejika’s fighting spirits hadn’t slackened in the least.

He took a step forward. “Hold on there a sec,” said a placid voice that was no less hair-raising. Sejika didn’t have to look at him to know who it was.

“Where are you going?” Setsura Aki asked.

Sejika turned around and stood there stunned. Behind the most

handsome man in the world was a wax-like young woman, and behind her, a dense forest filled with light.

"You—that cemetery."

"Cemetery?" Setsura echoed.

There—he was about to say, when a chill ran down his spine. He spun around again, amazed more than he was fearful or furious. The cemetery was gone. The hills rose above the meadow, the hills he and the prime minister and his men had just descended.

"I don't believe it—there was a graveyard right there."

"Obviously not," Setsura said plainly. "I saw you coming from that tree over there. I saw the prime minister and your colleagues disappear, but that was in the middle of the field."

Finally gathering his wits about him, Sejika asked, "Where did the prime minister go?"

"Seems he was dragged down into the earth. I haven't come to any definite conclusions, but I have a few theories. It's a pretty wild story."

"What kind of wild story?" Sejika said, not attempting to ascertain the young man's true nature.

"This world—" Setsura started to say. A thin veil shadowed his face.

"Mist," Sejika said. The word hadn't left his mouth before the swirling white—like a bottle of India ink staining a bucket of white paint—blanketed the three. A stabbing pain seized him around the

waist. Sejika stiffened. The pain soon faded.

"You and I are tied together. No matter where you go, I will know."

"W-Who are you?" Sejika asked, despite himself.

"Good question," he quipped. Despite the airy tone, Sejika felt relief more than anger. The man said, "I don't suppose it'd do any good telling you to stay here, but this mist is manmade. That woman's doing. So I'd appreciate it if you'd just bide your time while I find the prime minister."

Disregarding his own status, with a sense of confidence in that clear and assertive voice Sejika didn't fully understand himself, he asked again, "Who are you?"

"A manhunter."

"You could be the best, but finding people who've sunken into the earth?"

"Again, blame it on the woman. She's messing with us. As things stand now, there's no way for me to find the prime minister. But simply letting things stand is not her game. Like teasing a cat with a ball of yarn, she's the twisted sort who would enjoy nothing more than yanking him away when he is right within my grasp."

"Messing with us—" was all the amazed Sejika could say.

These bizarre goings-on, kidnapping a country's prime minister, was all just a game she was playing with this young man? He was a bodyguard down to his bones, in this career for twenty years, and for

the first time he knew he was way beyond his depth.

“So how should we tackle this problem? Or, what do you have in mind to do?”

“We’re going to take a walk around. Don’t worry.”

“With that girl? I don’t get it myself, but I figure you’re right about this place. Fine, but why don’t you leave her with me?”

“Well, that’s a bit of a problem,” he replied, in tones resembling a carefree smile. “Mind if I tell you the honest truth?”

“Go ahead.”

“She’d be too much for you to handle.”

For some reason, Sejika didn’t take it personally.

“Stay here. If anything funny happens, I can’t guarantee I can come running, so you’ll have to improvise.”

“Got it,” said Sejika, a portion of his iron will returning to his voice.

“Well, then.”

Sejika watched as the two shadows faded away into the haze. He couldn’t help thinking that even the man’s silhouette was handsome.

Chapter Three

Setsura grumbled as he walked along with Takako, “The games have begun.”

Knowing how Princess’s mind worked, this kind of horseplay went without saying, though it was the kind of horseplay that put lives at risk—the product of the most ill-natured person in the universe at that moment.

Knowing that, however, and describing the conflict thusly suggested a state of mind that was no less mysterious. To start with, wandering around this world like he was going for a walk in the park. And bringing a girl with him to boot. But the clincher was that nonchalant expression.

Half of it was for show. Then there was Ryuuki’s *qi*, dammed up in his gut like a chronic disease. The fatigue seeped into his cells, the ague coursed through his blood. But he drove himself forward. The fine control required to manipulate the devil wires was growing iffy as those same devil wires shredded his fingertips.

The rest of his body wasn’t much better. He was surrounded on all sides by enemies and incompetents. Only Setsura Aki—a resident of Demon City—could keep a stiff upper lip in such a situation.

The heavy mist wrapped around his face and slicker. “Hurry up —” *and get out here already*, he was going to say, when he looked down at his feet.

A circle in the grass some twenty inches in diameter, the meadow grass neatly trimmed around the edges. It was less a hole than a wormhole into a separate space.

“The prime minister fell in here,” Setsura said, like a professor reviewing a paper before publication.

He hadn’t fallen in himself. An eagle-eyed observer would have noticed that since they set off in the thick mist, not a blade of grass had bent out of place. The soles of their shoes brushed the tips of the grass but didn’t touch the earth.

Bushes and trees were scattered here and there across the meadow. The devil wires stretched around them, allowing Setsura and Takako to safely pass across the meadow a fraction of an inch above the ground.

The hole closed in on itself and vanished. “And where will it appear next?”

Setsura Aki set off once again. After ten more steps, he stopped. Something was coming at them out of the mist. Bipedal, a hundred forty-five pounds, wearing size eight leather shoes—this much information was communicated to Setsura through the fine vibrations.

Another shimmer came down the threads. And stopped. They were fifty yards apart, checking out the situation, it seemed.

Strangely enough, Setsura didn’t sense any kind of animosity aimed at him. He cast out a devil wire. And, startled, reflexively drew it back in. “What the—” he blurted out.

From his forehead to the bridge of his nose ran a thin line of red. Blood. The enemy's attack had only grazed his forehead.

The weapon was the same as Setsura's devil wire. It drew back along the same angle and didn't attack again. The same as Setsura. He knew as well that it was the same titanium wire that he used.

"Unbelievable, meeting here of all places."

He started walking without hesitation. The presence of the *other* grew closer, an unbelievably calm presence. Setsura didn't stop. He and Takako kept on going.

Twenty yards, ten, five, two, one—as if from beneath a white veil a man's face appeared—collided with him, passed through him as if through the air itself, and emerged behind him. Setsura still didn't stop, only glanced over his shoulder.

And found he was looking back at himself. The face of Setsura, a line of blood trickling down his face. His opposite, soon lost in the mists, was himself. He'd known it as soon as the devil wire he fired off returned along the exact same vectors, in a reflection of himself. The target had done the same.

"Enough with the practical jokes," he grumbled, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Hey!" From far away on his right came a familiar voice. Realizing it was Kongodai, a rare look of delight rose to his otherwise languid face.

Though he hadn't spun his titanium threads in that direction, forty or fifty yards before and behind him he recalled two pine trees

at an angle to himself. Tying the trees together, Setsura shifted the threads until he and the voice were directly aligned, then returned to his hand.

He ran along this slender new path. The sky sang out above his head. A moment later, streaks of smoke bursts from fists, the devil wires rising up to meet the darts falling down on him.

His ten fingers spun their own kind of magic, swatting away the rain of darts while snagging dozens of them and snapping them back up. Humming through the air, the darts were sucked back into the sky from whence they came.

Followed by a scream. Not the usual kind of ear-piercing scream. Without a sound, not disturbing the mist. But it was a cry, as if the atmosphere itself had shouted it out.

The earth trembled. Setsura didn't have time to transfer to another thread and was tossed into the sky. A sound like fingernails on a blackboard—the devil wires stretching to the breaking point. The air shook, on the scale of a natural disaster.

The mists tore apart. Surging green hills appeared like waves on the sea. The surging crests beneath his feet bounced him like a trampoline. In the air, Setsura saw gravestones growing out of the earth. So Sejika wasn't lying after all.

He wound a wire around the cemetery's gravestones and sinking pine trees and perched on one and then the other like a hopping bird, then pulled on the thread in his left hand. Takako sprang up from where she was lying on the ground, riding on the wire.

“We’ve repulsed the first attack. What about the second?”

As soon as he got on top of the tree, he wrapped a wire around a branch and swung down like a pendulum and flung himself toward the forest. Letting go at the crest of the arc, he cast out another and transferred to it. An onlooker would have only seen the two of them dancing through empty space.

Nothing was amiss in the forest. The strangeness seemed confined to the rolling hills. “I wonder what happened to those bodyguards,” Setsura muttered with a touch of concern.

The shuddering sky had broken the thread connecting himself and Sejika. The rest was up to fate.

The most likely explanation suggested that “something” in that piece of land—or rather, a region of this world—was at the root of it. Not that this “something” ruled over it, but that this “something” *was* the land. When Setsura sent the darts flying back to where they’d come from, that “something” had felt the pain.

If Mephisto were here, he’d deliver a lecture on the subject. “It is called the Landlord,” said a voice beneath his feet.

Speak of the devil—not believing his ears, Setsura looked down at the white doctor standing beneath the tree.

“What are you doing here?”

“Quite the spectacle,” Mephisto said, placing a hand against the trunk. “You seem in good spirits.”

“I was until you showed up.”

An almost evil smile came to the physician's face. "I have been observing you up and about. My diagnosis is that you ruptured the Landlord's eye."

"That territory is its world, including the air above," Setsura said, recalling that he'd flung the darts back into the sky.

"Exactly. A demon of the old school. It leases what is in the land."

"Hence, the Landlord. And what does it lease?"

"Itself."

"Itself?"

"See for yourself." Mephisto gestured at the seething ground.

"Holy cow," Setsura said in blank surprise.

The green hills had transformed into a wasteland of red dirt, dead still except for a few withered shrubs swaying here and there in the wind.

"Left in the wake of the Landlord's departure. In short, it breathes brimming life into the lodging earth."

"Sounds like a certain doctor I know," Setsura quipped as he surveyed the scene before him. "I don't imagine you came here alone. Where are Princess and that traitor? You may beg off, but if you're helping to conceal the prime minister, I won't be so forgiving."

From the utter lack of intensity in the conversation, they could have been chatting over tea. But as far as Doctor Mephisto was

concerned, saying such things in such a manner was Setsura's *raison d'être*.

"Making your life miserable is Princess's hobby alone. I have nothing to do with it. Neither does Yakou." A stray strand of his hair got caught in the breeze. Mephisto raked it back with his fingers.

"And where is she?" Setsura asked in a suddenly surreptitious voice.

"I don't know. I was at the manor house. She invited me to come and see something spectacular."

"Then she's still in the manor house?"

"I do not know."

"There's still that favor I asked of you," Setsura said with a smile.

"What would that be?"

"This girl, of course." Setsura indicated Takako, sitting on the branch next to him. "She still hasn't transformed completely into a vampire. Her eyes turn clear from time to time. At this juncture, it should still be possible to treat her."

"I can say after I have examined her," said the Demon Physician.

"The sooner the better."

"Agreed."

"And if *she* complains, I'm sure you'll have a good excuse."

"Not even Heaven may lay a finger upon one of my patients." He may have turned into a vampire, but Doctor Mephisto remained very

much Doctor Mephisto.

“Much appreciated.”

Setsura gave Takako’s shoulder a slight push. She slipped off the branch and slowly alighted on the ground in front of Mephisto.

“Leave it to me.”

Thousands and tens of thousands of people visited the old government office building in Shinjuku to hear those words. He reached out. His cape spilled like a clear stream down on top of her. Enfolded as if in a cocoon, Takako’s expression took on a rapturous glow.

“My long-lost patient. I will examine you most carefully.”

Setsura raised a hand. “She’s all yours.”

Entrusting the vampire Takako to the vampire Mephisto—that could be called a profound sort of trust. Through the branches, Setsura watched as the white-clad figure disappeared among the trees.

“That’s a relief,” he said, pressing a hand against his abdomen, as if doing his best to convince himself. “Though I do have to wonder.”

A more honest emotion perhaps. Setsura directed his gaze away from Mephisto and to the ruined village. The final battle would take place there.

“Hey,” a voice called out, in the vain hope that somebody else might hear him.

The mist had begun rising to the treetops where he was standing.

Now it flowed like a dream toward the village. This manhunter had to figure out how to save the owner of that voice, Prime Minister Kongodai.

Fresh blood welled up. As long as he kept wielding his devil wire day and night, the flesh was never going to heal, the blood was never going to stop.

“Ouch, that stings.”

Showing no other evident signs of pain, the young man in black swung down into the center of the mist.

Part Two: Ring of Fire

Chapter One

"Where are you going?"

The voice was right next to him. Though he clearly understood that, it could just as well have descended from the heavens or welled up from beneath his feet—a dire and mysterious voice luring his mind into stupefaction and turmoil.

"To the manor house," Mephisto answered shortly.

"To do what?" Walking along beside him, Princess peered at Takako's face.

"I promised Setsura I would restore this girl to human form."

"Can you do such a thing?"

Princess shifted her gaze, filled with curiosity, to Mephisto. Since her reign as vampire queen began—or perhaps because of it—no vampire had, by itself, reassumed human form. Hence her great intrigue.

"I cannot say for now," said Mephisto, as a doctor—as the Demon Physician—a decidedly qualified answer.

"You cannot," said Princess, her eyes brimming with an indescribable light. "Don't you think that tens of thousands have also attempted it in the past? Some have succeeded, but not through the healing arts. A stake through the heart of the vampire who sucked their blood, the head cut off. Ha! Can you kill me, Demon

Physician?”

“That is something a doctor cannot say.”

Mephisto looked down at Takako. With a jerk, she wrapped her arms around his neck. A moment later, they snapped off cleanly at the elbows and dropped to the ground.

Blood sprayed across his white cape. Takako screamed. Raising her hands against her will, Setsura’s invisible threads had sliced off her arms. Without so much as a blink, Mephisto placed his hands over the severed limbs. The fountains of blood ceased. So did Takako’s screams.

With a simple touch, he had staunched the blood and quelled the pain.

“Oh, so you care enough to also make use of your *qi*?”

“Not to the same degree as Kikiou. But it is within a doctor’s province. We must, however, remain cruelly unbowed by sentiment.”

“Hoh. It seems that making this girl human again will hardly tax your talents. Then neither should replacing an arm or two. But if you like, I will happily lend a hand.”

“Then why don’t you?” Mephisto said.

He stepped forward and seized Princess’s right arm. The way she pulled back reflexively, she must have felt something—with a single twist of his wrist, her arm broke like a branch.

“Nice one.” Cradling the broken limb, Princess smiled.

“This is not to say what is in your heart is any great mystery to

me, but I promised Setsura that not a finger would be laid upon my patient. Having broken that promise, the price must be paid. It is *you* towards whom I must remain cruelly unbowed by sentiment."

Princess's hand slipped out of Mephisto's grip. Not because he released it, but with a simple flick of her wrist. She touched the elbow with her free hand. With an audible pop, the fracture healed.

"No matter how great the Demon Physician may be, he cannot overcome my powers of regeneration. Is this the price you spoke of?"

"Think of that as a passing hello." Mephisto nodded gracefully and strode off.

For the woman left behind, no experience could have been more ominous. What possible price might the Demon Physician exact? As she watched the man in the white cape walk away, the face of the beautiful vampire queen broke into a broad smile.

"Demon Physician's revenge. How dreadful it must be. But I remain indestructible."

The most important thing to this woman was life itself. A vampire was already dead. Was such a life the life of the living dead, or could it be called the personification of death itself?

"Damn it, Setsura, you've made your way through. Now the real show begins. I prepared that village especially for you. Make the most of the delights awaiting you. I'm sure you'll be the life of the party."

There in the midst of the deep green world, Princess threw back her head and laughed. The contours of her face bathed in light, this

seemed the pure laughter of an innocent child.

That night, a great commotion filled the skies above Shinjuku. The police and ward helicopter patrols all scanned the earth with one particular objective in mind.

Among them was a Shinjuku police patrol jet helicopter called "Night Moon." It was flying from West Waseda to Kikuicho and Bentencho. Passing through the air above Haramachi, a strange sight appeared in the pilot's night scope.

Here and there in Shinjuku remained scattered blocks of ruins. In one corner of one of them, in a field twenty yards in diameter, burned a bright flame. What caught the pilot's attention was the nature of the fire. The people lying there had beer bottles in their hands, and more were scattered about.

A bunch of ordinary drunks, obviously. But this fire—a bonfire? It was a sweltering night in August.

The pilot hovered a hundred feet above the ground and zoomed in with the undercarriage camera. The image on the screen magnified. A second later, the detail sharpened and filled in.

He knew at once what this "fire" was: a nuclear reactor. The automatic safeties should have kicked in once an out-of-plumb condition was detected, but this must be an aftermarket model, with crap specs to match.

"Shit, these drunks are really getting out of control. I can't believe they busted up a nuke. What do you want to do?"

The gunner in the back seat tapped the pilot on the shoulder.

“What?”

“Those aren’t shadows beneath them. That’s blood.”

“No way.”

“Definitely blood.”

“Now what?” asked the pilot. In two-man situations like this, the gunner had command authority.

“Call it into the ground troops. Until they arrive, let’s maintain this position. Hail ’em on the speakers.”

“Roger.”

The helicopter’s external speakers blared out: “This is Shinjuku police helicopter Night Moon. We’re observing you from above. If anybody’s alive down there, wave a hand or something. Our cameras will pick up any movement.”

By that point, the specifics of the slaughter were showing up on the screen. From their clothing, they seemed to be vagrants. There were eleven of them. Four were women. Three were children. Dead as nails.

“That kid is face up. Throat’s been cut.”

“What the hell went on here?” asked the pilot, having radioed the situation into headquarters. He swallowed the bile rising in his throat. He took note of an oddity. “Hey, not much blood on the women.”

All the rest were lying in pools of blood large enough to be mistaken for shadows.

“Vampires—those Toyama bastards.”

“Naw. They all got blown to kingdom come. Vampire or nutball, what we got here is serial killer stuff. The other seven weren’t killed for their blood, but after the fact.”

“Hells bells.”

“I’m turning her around.” The pilot regripped the joystick. “Let’s widen the search. Look at the kid. Blood’s still flowing. The perp’s got to be in the vicinity.”

“Okay.”

“We catch up with him, you’d better arrest him on the spot. Or I may just blow him away.”

“Roger that.” The gunner nodded, not letting go of the firing controls.

The tightly-contained roar of the engine slanted down against the asphalt as the pilot initiated a widening right turn.

“Got him!” he called out.

A naked man was walking north on one of the streets leading out of the ruins. He was carrying a musical instrument that looked like a koto in one hand. Not all that unusual a sight for Shinjuku. But based on the situation and the circumstances, the pilot knew in his gut it was him.

A searchlight shot out from the undercarriage of the helicopter and enveloped the man. “Hey, naked guy, stop right there and raise your hands!”

According to regulations, the pilot made the command in measured tones. The man came to a halt. His skin glowed white within the ring of light. Not a blemish marred his skin. Only his hair was singed, but in a way that suggested the stylings of some avant-garde fashion model.

He didn't plant his arms against the wall on the right as ordered, but lifted his face toward the helicopter.

"Fucking A—" the gunner groaned.

The pilot had the same reaction. Though the man's mouth was painted with black blood, his symmetrical face—a match to his equally proportioned body—managed a balance of grace and ruggedness. The black stain from his throat to his chest, however, created a sight that was anything but refined.

Like a man who had just indulged himself beyond his own ability to believe, the eyes looking up at the helicopter were empty voids.

"Son of a bitch looks like he just stuffed himself to the gills." The gunner growled like a tiger. "After what he did to that kid, he deserves what's coming to him."

"A chameleon's gonna be here in another minute, and a patrol car's on the way. Hold it together. Let's not add to the body count."

The eyes of the pilot gazing down through the polarized glass were no less filled with loathing. A deep and abiding hatred of crime and criminals—that was the "first principle" drilled into the heads of the Shinjuku Police Force, the "Demon City Cops." The kind of take-it-easy attitude towards lawlessness tolerable outside this city

was impossible inside it.

Gangs with guns buried in their guts wired to their autonomic reflexes that would unload on a cordon of cops when they raised their hands to surrender—

Mad bombers who'd wire the scene of the crime to explode when law enforcement arrived, taking out the evidence and the cops in one fell swoop—

Assassins who targeted cops as a specialty, the hairs on their bodies turning into needles that could kill with a hug, passing themselves off as dancers in strip clubs and aphrodisiac bars—

Serving alongside a veteran for a week turned the sweetest greenhorn into an ogre when it came to the criminal element. Either that or end up in the morgue or in a padded cell. That's what it meant to work the Shinjuku beat. No exceptions.

To live or die—for any cop, that was what it always came down to in the end—but inside and outside the ward, the results could be a world apart. Outside the ward, a cop had his life to lose at worst. In Shinjuku, his soul was on the line.

This time, though, whatever the men in the sky wanted, it would have to yield to the suits getting out of the Pulsar parked across the street from the suspect.

A chameleon—back in the day, a "police car in disguise"—was a stock model used by plainclothes detectives to patrol the streets camouflaged. The name came from the infamous Demon City Chameleon that could slip among the populace, a wolf among the

sheep, taking on the appearance of its surroundings, then discarding them in a flash to reveal its ravenous nature.

"Hands against the wall!"

The detectives were wearing night vision goggles and holding AP-9 model 90 submachine guns against their hips. Barely fifteen inches long, the guns held thirty-round magazines and could be easily hidden out of sight behind the back.

The suspect merely shifted his gaze from the helicopter to the patrol car.

"You got eyes on you from above too. If you don't do as you're told before the count of three, we open fire."

The steely-cold directive was no bluff. Normal operating procedure in this city. There was no telling what even a naked man might do—vomit up beer or acid that could melt glass. His intestines might snake out of his ass and crush a cop's chest like a python.

"Stand back!" the man said, in a low tenor voice that would have made any woman passing by stop and ask for his number.

"One," the detective said.

Shutters beneath the headlights of the chameleon louvered open. The nose of a nine-round, 70 mm rocket launcher jutted out. At the same time, a 20 mm laser cannon slipped out from the left fender and turned to fix the man in its sights. The driver was at the controls, but the weapons could be operated remotely as well.

No matter how fearless the man appeared, the detective didn't

doubt his own abilities. “Two,” he said.

“I will deal with myself by myself. I will never be so humble as to submit to the orders of another.”

The man turned around. He hadn’t a stitch on him, but the cool, calm and collected manner in which he did it made the cop’s heart skip a beat. Nevertheless—

“Three.”

In the blossoming white flower created by the lights from the car and helicopter, the man went to turn left at the corner of the street.

“Freeze!”

The words had barely left his mouth when the detective pressed the trigger on the AP-9. This wasn’t a city where a cop firing on full-automatic was cruel or unusual. He was a good shot too, putting five rounds in a row into the man’s side in a six-inch radius.

The impact threw the man against the wall. The koto in his left hand raised a clear echoing sound. A pleasant shock ran through the detective’s brain. He staggered, in a flash going from killer determination to looking placidly at the naked man standing in front of him.

He was holding the koto in his mouth. Red lines of light slashed across his chest, the laser beams piercing bone and muscle and fat and scorching the wall behind him.

The man lifted his left arm. To the helicopter crew, some invisible thread bound the man and the detective together. No sooner had the

detective crumpled to the ground holding his side, but the driver inside the car pressed the trigger on the rocket launcher.

The 70 mm rockets slipped almost languidly out of the tubes just as something touched the two pods. The fire erupted like a red flower spreading its poisonous petals. As if beseeched by the city for a more appropriate display of destruction, the petals of black smoke and flames painted the ground and sky with mad and garish colors.

The naked man was Ryuuki.

A faint look of sadness rose to a countenance that seemed the blessed combination of a wild man and a man of letters. In times past, amidst the bodies of the dead, he had worn a similar expression on the battlefields after yet again pushing his enemies back from the borderlands.

The gunner in the helicopter armed the fire control computers and then froze. Even a laser cannon didn't make a dent on the guy. It was hard to see how adding more fuel would help. Pyrrhic victories weren't his thing.

Then came the wail of police sirens. The pilot had contacted headquarters about the scope and nature of the conflict. Surrounding the enemy at a distance, the officers piled out of the vehicles and took cover immediately, showing no inclination to inch closer.

"You there, in the middle of the street, come out!"

Trying to talk him down—while an intense animosity and thirst for blood filled the narrow street. These were hardened fighters who'd battled the worst of Shinjuku's monsters, using the vehicle as

a shield precisely because they knew the chances of surrender were thin.

In the moonlight, the multi-barrel laser guns and long-barreled hand cannons that could turn an armored vehicle into Swiss cheese cast off a dangerous glow. The lights of the helicopter overhead steadily drew nearer, until the quarry was directly beneath it.

“He’s coming!” somebody called out, a bit too eagerly.

Light filled the narrow alley, washing out the shadows. Eight patrol cars and sixteen weapons drew a bead on the solitary figure.

A moment later, the helicopter pilot saw something even stranger.

Chapter Two

Setsura was in bad shape, but he was feeling fairly upbeat.

Takako was with Mephisto. Mephisto had vowed that no one would lay a finger on her, and he'd wager his soul to keep his word. Setsura hadn't lost a whole lot of sleep over him becoming a vampire, and neither had he spent a whole lot of time wondering why.

Let Mephisto be Mephisto. That was enough.

However reassuring that might be, his original goals were still up in the air, and the state of affairs on the ground was not reassuring.

Two hours had passed since he'd come to this world with Princess. Not only hadn't he escorted Prime Minister Kongodai to safety, he hadn't even found him yet. The extent of Princess's powers and whatever her monsters might be up to was entirely unclear, but it was no stretch to say that nothing got his goat more than that.

However, the most effective course of action was entirely different.

The young man striding across the balmy field hardly appeared—and not just on the surface—to be driven by such provocations. In the final moments that fate might inevitably deliver to him, he would shrug his shoulders and say: "Well, them's the breaks, I guess."

He was on a street in the village. The mist all around him was so thick it reflected only his own shadow. Now and then, deeper in, the

dark shapes of the ruins rose up before his eyes, and then was swallowed in the world of white.

This time Setsura didn't shout. Which is to say, he didn't go scrambling around in a tizzy. More like a portrait of a young man strolling down a street in a London fog.

"If they're going to keep their distance, no sense getting on people's nerves bugging them about where the prime minister is."

He sensed being passed by on the right and left. The shapes of people or birds flitted above his head. None of them spoke.

"Where is the prime minister? Come tomorrow, even this manhunter won't know."

Right now, a myriad of *somethings* surrounded Setsura. Silent, unbreathing, matching him step for step. Setsura must be aware of their existence. The tension would have driven any normal person mad.

The cordon tightened. The mist in front of him billowed up. A man's face poked through the haze. A fearless and rugged-looking man with a splendid Fu Manchu mustache that jutted out from beneath his nose in an inverted V. The thick lips moved. He spoke.

Setsura didn't understand a thing he said. It was ancient Chinese. Perhaps he recognized a word that meant "search." But the grammar was indecipherable. "Looking for somebody?" was a possible guess.

Grasping that he was not being understood, the man's face slipped back into the mist. Another appeared. A young man full of piss and vinegar. He pointed at his face with a hand decorated with

gaudy rings.

Setsura understood that. “No,” he said in Cantonese, shaking his head. “I’m not searching for you.” He’d picked up a smattering of Cantonese back when a Hong Kong tour operation was headquartered in West Shinjuku, but never more than that.

The young man disappeared as well.

“Who’s doing the deciding here?” Setsura muttered without stopping. “Maybe it’ll be a woman next.”

With a quiet whoosh, a woman’s face appeared. A voluptuous, indescribably beautiful woman’s face. She indicated herself.

“Though I do appreciate the concern.” She vanished too. “Is this some kind of speed-dating sideshow? Hey—” Setsura recognized the face that appeared next, one of Kongodai’s bodyguards. He’d seen him get sucked into the ground. “You’ll do,” he said cheerfully.

The man smiled back. The hand bent as if to seize Setsura by the lapels and reached toward his throat. A hand covered with gray bristles.

Setsura didn’t move. Blood stained the mist red. The man grabbed hold of his severed wrist with an inhuman scream. At the same time, from the fog around them came the feral roars of wild animals.

“You were evicted by the Landlord?” Setsura asked the sinking form. “Where’s the prime minister?”

The man shot to his feet, a gray beast wearing a suit coat.

“So, Mr. Bear, is it?” said Setsura, in tones suggesting that even he found this a bit odd. With a growl, the big animal turned and was swallowed up by the mist.

Setsura leaned over, searching for something that had just occurred to him. His finger groped through the haze and touched a hard, ceramic-like surface. It was a mask. From the dimensions and contours and spacing of the eyes and nose, he knew it was the exact reproduction of a man’s, though containing none of the “life” he had just encountered.

It was a primitive item, made from fired, painted clay. And yet quite a piece of work.

Setsura pushed aside the fog like wading through a high surf and entered a house on the right. All the things around him whined and whimpered but gave way.

On the floor was what appeared to be a potter’s wheel. A kiln was next to it. What filled in the rest of the puzzle were the human faces arrayed on the still-standing wall. The finished masks were of men and women, the young and the old. They looked down at Setsura with hollow eyes filled with the anguish of rotting away in a place like this.

He visited the house next door and found the same thing there. “If you don’t mind,” he said, picking up one of each and going outside. He stopped and said, “What’s this?”

“Enjoying yourself?” Princess smiled, the mist wrapped around her like light.

“I gather this is a mask-making village?”

“Correct.”

“Bears are that good with clay?” Setsura asked with raised eyebrows, the image rising to his thoughts.

“One of the animals that lives around here. They are all here.” Princess made a stroking gesture with her hand. Here and there sounded the growls of wild animals. “This village has been here since before the Hsia Dynasty, devoted to the making of masks. You have seen the fineness of the detail for yourself. In time, the technique surpassed mere dexterity and entered the realm of the gods.”

“Impressive.”

“Once a person dons a mask made in this village, not only the face but the physical being, down to the soul, becomes the mask, whether that of a human or a beast.”

Setsura folded his arms and nodded. “Makes sense, I guess.”

He was being perfectly serious, perhaps because Princess herself showed such intense interest in the subject.

“But the village was destroyed by a king many centuries before the Hsia. Wiped out to a man. Only the masks remained. And here are their remains.”

“Why was it destroyed?”

“For dishonoring the king’s wife. A mask maker in this village was struck by the queen’s beauty and carved a mask of her in secret.

Had he stored it away and kept it to himself, all would have been well. But keeping such a work of magnificent art to himself must have driven the man mad. So he secretly delivered it to the queen. How do you think she reacted?"

"I imagine she was furious. Something like, *I* am the fairest one of all."

"No, she was impressed." Princess gazed back at Setsura, a toying smile on her lips. "It struck her that though the mere work of a man, the mask held a beauty that could not be equaled anywhere else on earth. Entranced, she gazed raptly upon it. At the beginning of the third month, she begged the king to attack the village of the mask maker and slaughter all of its inhabitants."

"Huh," said Setsura.

"I'm sure you understand why, her reasons and emotions. Certainly *you* would understand. The queen was taken by her own beauty, and frightened by it. It seemed to her altogether possible that the mask maker could also discover this perfection in the face of another woman. But no—a woman as beautiful as her could not exist elsewhere. That was not at the root of her anxiety. What if the mask maker continued to live and was asked to again pour his love and devotion into a mask of her? What if it did not equal the perfection of the first? And what if, by chance, another being were to behold it? What if only the maker beheld it? How could such a situation be tolerated?"

"And exterminating the village was the only answer?" Setsura said, as if bored with the subject already.

“That is the nature of women. Well, beautiful women.” Princess laughed a radiant laugh.

“But the village aside, she could not tolerate even one mask remaining. To her mind, she must have thought the most natural thing to do was to destroy everything, down to the last mask.”

“You can count on a woman to really think these things through.” A sly smile rose to her lips.

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“The king’s army destroyed every last mask and burned the houses to the ground. After that several centuries passed. The charred remains were carried off by the wind and rain, rendering it a wasteland, visited only by the birds and beasts of the field. The king couldn’t have foreseen the miracle that happened next. It was probably a monkey that dug a mask out of the mud and put it on. The miracle was that this particular mask was that of the mask maker whose creations had so impressed the queen. The results you can see around you.”

“The monkey wearing the mask became the mask maker.”

“And so the village was revived. The new mask makers searched their memories and fashioned masks for the villagers and put them on the animals that came here.”

“Such as the bear.” Setsura gazed up at the sky. He felt a little let down. Scanning his environment he said, “A pretty sad revival.”

“Animals are animals. However they might don masks that rise to the work of the gods themselves and feign human form, after a while

the true nature peeks out. More time passed, and they discarded the masks and returned to the wilds. The few that remained gradually grew deeply steeped in their underlying natures."

"You keep dragging me off to one freak show after the other," Setsura said, almost like an afterthought. He was pissed, but true to his own nature, didn't let it show. "What's your game?"

"Do you think I would tell you?"

"What the hell did you come here for anyway?" Setsura said, as if asking about the weather. "To take me on a sightseeing tour of this village? That's not in *your* nature."

"I came here to show you the way."

"Yeah, right."

"Keep going straight on this road for as long as it takes. On the way there, no matter what happens, ignore it. Should it stand in your way, turn to the left. Not to the right. That is where the prime minister will be."

"And why should I believe you?"

"I have placed plenty of traps laid in your path, just for you. Better that you step into my snares while in a good mood."

"You here for anything else?"

"That is all."

"Got it. Now get lost."

Princess took a step back. As if waiting in the wings, the thick

fog draped itself around her. In a flash, she had dissolved back into it.

“Thanks but no thanks. I’ll do it my way.”

Setsura started walking. It wasn’t his way to give his enemies the benefit of the doubt either. The Setsura that was Setsura was too contrary a fellow. He hadn’t gone ten yards before the voices echoed all around him, beckoning, cajoling.

“Come over here.”

“Closer, a little closer.”

“I’ll make a mask for you.”

Setsura didn’t understand any of it. What he felt was a strong projection of will, that an average person with only a strong sense of self-denial would have found hard to resist.

He wanted to stop. He wanted to turn around. The strange emotions roiled in the depths of his chest and surged unstoppably into his throat, brimming with bitter and woeful thoughts.

Was this why Princess came here? Something deeper and deeper down, murmuring coolly in a heart stained with curious colors. This was not about snatching his prey from before his eyes. But what was this thing that lay along the path to his right, that he absolutely should not see?

Chapter Three

The voices sang out one after the other.

“Come over here, I said.”

“I’ll make a mask just for you, the most beautiful mask in the world.”

“Wear it, and you can become anybody.”

These were beasts who’d donned the masks of the dead villagers. Having made masks of everything in sight, the desire to fashion and create yet burned in them like hot coals. They would of course see Setsura’s face as the ideal model. Those who visited this village would be inexorably drawn into their abodes and their faces stolen away.

Perhaps even their lives were taken in the process, and those who returned to their countries and their families were really these creatures in disguise—boars and bears and tigers.

Setsura stopped, his feet laden with the weight of a long journey made. “Here,” an old woman’s voice said in his ear.

“Turn here,” a young man whispered.

He couldn’t search with his devil wires. Every nerve in his body was devoted to fending off the magnetic attraction of the voices.

“What a beautiful boy,” chattered the girls in the town. “He is so handsome.”

Setsura raised his right hand. In his hand he held a clay mask. "Ah," somebody said behind him. The mask clung to Setsura's face.

"What—isn't that Riyan?"

"I know that face. I carved it so many times."

The zeal quickly faded from their words. Their presence slipped away behind him. Released from the spell, Setsura staggered, not simply because of the release of the psychological pressure. At that moment, he experienced the additional surge of an intense mental force.

Concentrating his will into his right hand, he tore the mask from his face and threw it to his feet. He didn't step on it, but dropped to one knee and crushed it. Only then was he truly unbound.

Whether by intent or lucky accident, he'd picked up the mask of an ordinary face from amidst the ruins, put it on, and had instantly lost that sense of being made an emotional captive to their interests. At that moment, another battle had begun.

Just as Princess said, the masks made in this village were imbued with souls that usurped that of the wearer. They were several thousand times stronger than the siren calls of the villagers alone. Setsura was nevertheless able to fight back and win.

He touched his own face with an empty hand. How had he triumphed? As that unknown spirit threatened to overpower him completely, he had heard, far away, the cry of someone in his death throes—"Such beauty can't be sculpted!"

Setsura heard it as an incomprehensible declaration of defeat.

But from the way he stroked his face, it seemed that he'd sensed something else.

"Whoever it was must have met a bad end. Well, I guess I'll have to turn left."

Setsura took a breath and got to his feet. The shards of the mask melted into the earth like summer hail. He set off again and the voices did not chase after him.

A hundred yards further on, an adobe wall appeared out of the mist. At the edge of town the narrow alley ran between two houses. It turned to the left.

Princess's voice welled up. Setsura answered with a shake of his head. "I said I understood." And without hesitation he went right.

"Fool," he had a feeling was Princess's parting word.

On his left was a mud fence, on his right was a broken-down house. The road was a good dozen feet wide. Setsura narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Ahead of him were the dark outlines of what looked like a house. "What's this?" he blurted out.

And what a strange house it was. What caught his attention in particular were the many thick chains wrapped around the walls. This must be what Princess had warned him about, even what kept her from accompanying him. Getting caught in one of her traps might be preferable, but at this point, backing down would be no less infuriating.

He approached the crumbling front foyer and grabbed hold of the rusting chain. It was bound with great force and bit into the posts

and didn't budge an inch. Whatever was inside wasn't supposed to get out.

Setsura raised his right hand and with a light wave brought it down. The chains parted cleanly and dropped to the earth with a dull clang. After the sound died away, Setsura slid the door open. A familiar smell struck his nose, the smell of the earth.

And something else—it was warm. A fire was burning inside. Considering its reserved nature, it was different from an open-hearth fire and a stove. Setsura could begin to guess what was going on in this oddly built house.

Past the foyer was a room with a wooden floor. A table and chair were sitting there, so old they looked like they'd disintegrate at a touch. Setsura steadied his legs and took a step.

A creak rang out.

He wrapped a strand of devil wire around a leg of the table and stepped onto that. The floor beneath the table didn't make a sound. He had come here disregarding Princess's wishes, and had to wonder what if any of this had anything to do with finding Prime Minister Kongodai.

The source of the heat was behind a half-open door.

Setsura flung out a devil wire. His laid-back mien relaxed a bit more several seconds later. He looked at the door and nodded, not a completely satisfied expression. More a puzzled air.

The iron hinges creaked and the door opened inwards, the devil wire pulling on the handle from the inside. Like the one he was

presently in, the dimly lit room had sunlight streaking through a round window. Setsura confirmed what his devil wires had told him.

On the floor sat a long, squat workbench on a tattered rug. Set into the far wall was an adobe stove. The mouth of the kiln was sealed with square stones. Flames flickered out from the gaps between them, along with an iron rod with a wooden handle at the end.

Next to the kiln, reaching from the floor to the ceiling, were broken faces, faces, and more faces—a mountain of failed masks. So vivid and raw were the broken mouths of these masks that they could be the severed heads of the conquered dead cursing their fates.

Setsura's attention fell on an old man bent over the workbench, his hands kneading something in a jar.

The top of his bald head glistened. From beneath his nose and chin, the long beard of an old wizard hung down to his chest.

He didn't look at Setsura, so immersed in his work as to fill the air with a coolly sublime and almost holy tension. Setsura could imagine him draped with one of those sacred Shinto ropes tied around holy objects in Japan.

Dammit, he thought a moment later. Catching Setsura quite off guard, the old man rose to his feet. Setsura was sure he must have heard something. But the old man in the black robe passed by Setsura's fixed gaze to the kiln. There he bent over and clapped his hands three times, mumbling an incantation.

After wrapping his hands in an asbestos-like material, he

removed the stone from the mouth of the kiln. Flames licked out. The old man didn't flinch. He grasped the handle of the iron rod. The end of the rod was shaped like the flat, long blade of a shovel.

There was a mask on the blade of the shovel.

He carried the glowing mask on the red-hot shovel to a large pot and thrust it into the wide mouth. A billow of smoky steam rose up.

Several seconds later, he took it out again.

It didn't seem that his intent was to dry the clay, but to fix its shape during the firing process. Tendrils of vapor rose from the shovel. He placed the shovel on the floor.

Staring intensely at his creation, he suddenly seized it with both hands. As if those hands were suffused with a supernatural loathing, he cast it down, smashing into pieces this thing just born into the world.

"A mistake," he wailed in an incomprehensibly ancient language. He turned his deeply creased face to Setsura.

"Good day," said Setsura. It seemed the most appropriate greeting. "Too bad about that," he said, pointing down at the old man's feet and drawing his brows in empathy.

The old man didn't share the same feeling. His was more an expression of bitter resignation. Sitting at a window in a cafe or villa deep in the forest, holding a coffee mug in one hand while watching the pouring rain—by itself a scene worthy of a painted scroll. The crude tools and the lowly setting—the cruel beauty masked it all.

“Another blunder.”

The old man turned sorrowfully to Setsura. Light shimmered faintly in the depths of his teary eyes. Danger lurked there.

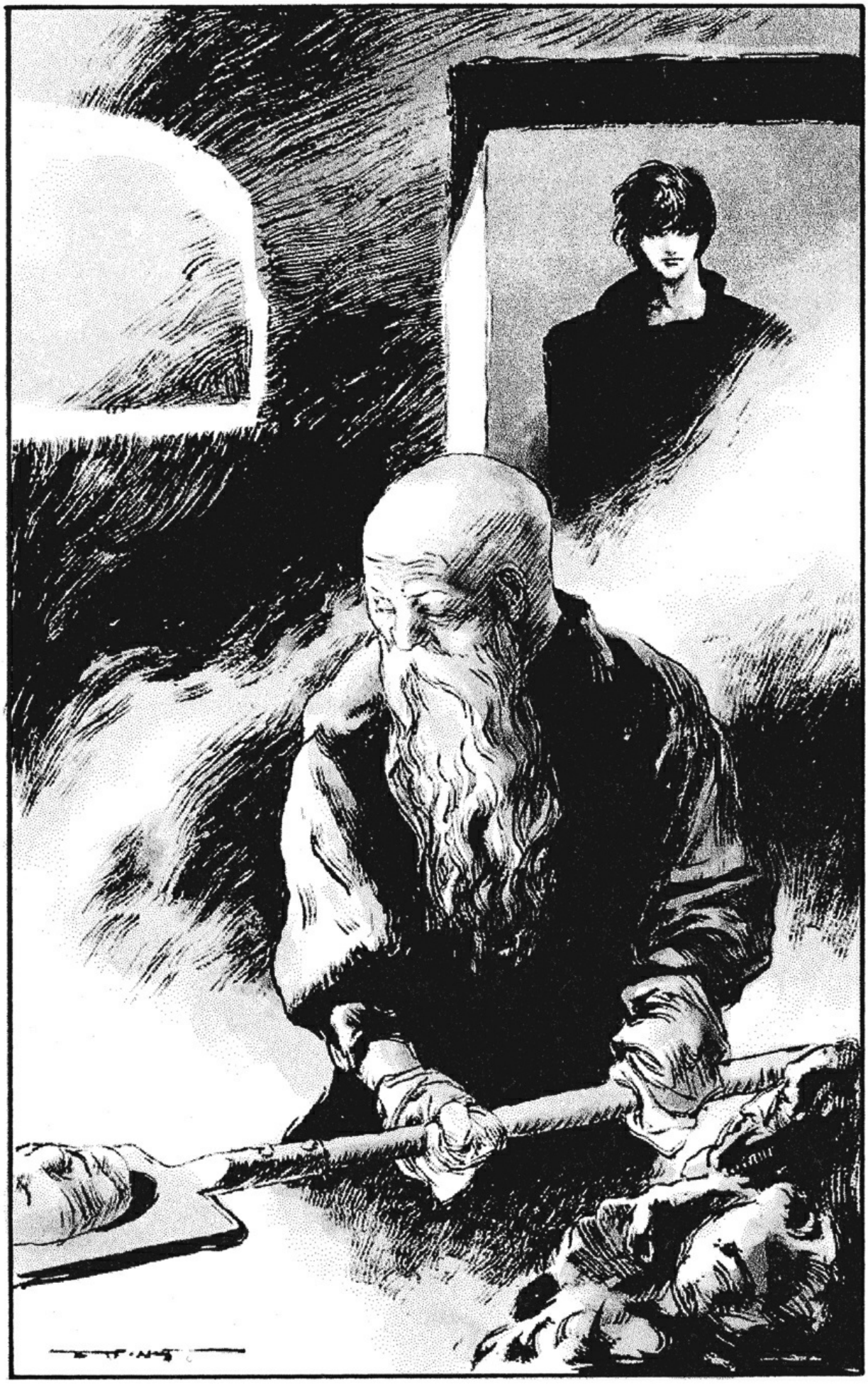
“The inhabitants of this village sealed me inside this house and stood watch to prevent me from leaving. During that time, I studied my craft, creating what they could only dream of. I set out to once again produce works that struck terror into their hearts. But such a creation still escapes me. Not a one even rises to my own meager standards.”

“That is most unfortunate,” Setsura sympathized, though he hadn’t comprehended a thing the old man said.

“I understand what is at the root of the problem—the ebb of my creative desires. After making *that*, and seeing it destroyed, despair ate away at my soul. But now I know. The fires burn within me once again. I will create that countenance of yours.”

“Are you all right?” Setsura asked. He felt a disturbing tremor in the old man’s eyes and voice.

He jabbed a wrinkled, spotted finger at his face. “You are definitely more than your beauty. Lurking beneath that comely exterior are abilities that rise beyond mere wizardry.”



“Absolutely.” Setsura feigned comprehension and nodded solemnly. As a general rule, going along with an old man’s chatter best served the interests of the young.

“Come. Come along,” he said, beckoning with his hand while returning to his work bench.

He fixed his tenacious eyes on Setsura and reached into the jar, slowly turning and stirring. Setsura gazed back, unflustered, without objection. Didn’t he understand? More than three hours had passed since returning to this world. In less than four, an Armageddon of lightning and thunder would be unleashed in the sky over Demon City Shinjuku.

Doctor Mephisto stood before the bed Takako was lying on. He turned around. Two shadows were at the door—Yakou and Kikiou.

“I am operating soon. Observers are not welcome.”

Kikiou said, “We have direct orders from Princess.”

Only his head said it. Yakou was holding it against his left side. General Bey had torn out Kikiou’s throat on the roof of the Shinjuku night shift bus. Mephisto had treated him when he returned to this world, but had only completed a successful separation of the head from the body.

He spoke to Mephisto more bluntly than before, probably because of his irritation over that.

“What sort of orders?” His disregard for them was obvious in his face alone as he turned his back.

“To make sure that during his treatment of Takako, Doctor Mephisto did not do anything that might prove disadvantageous to Princess. Preventing such a thing would be the duty of any good servant.”

Mephisto suddenly grew very still. Takako was lying on the bed in front of him. What manner of surgery under what manner of anesthetic—her eyes were closed and she slumbered in a deep and restful sleep. The surgical instruments on the wooden table next to the bed cast off a silver gleam under the bright electric lights in the ceiling.

Surrounded by a stone floor and walls, the ancient lived alongside modern science in this operating room in the manor house of a vampire.

“You intend to stand in the way of my treatments?”

“No,” Kikiou corrected him with a smile. “A turn of phrase.” Though the way he said it he was clearly aware that he had said the wrong thing.

“Not turned that much,” said Yakou.

Kikiou glared up at him. In the precarious position of being propped up, there wasn’t more he could do than that.

“The master is the master and the servant is the servant—both shall bear their measure of responsibility for presumptuously obstructing a surgery by Doctor Mephisto.”

“Doctor, please wait.”

“Kikiou, I shall return Takako Kanan to her human state. That is the promise I made to Setsura. And after that, the man Setsura scorns as a traitor, Yakou. Your original enemy will be restored. And then perhaps I will destroy you. True, Princess may be a tad upset.”

And Kikiou’s head went a tad green.

“Yakou, what say you?”

Caught off guard, the young scion stumbled a bit. “I—”

“Ah, can you act counter to Princess’s commands?”

“Exactly!” said Kikiou’s head. “No one may act in opposition to Princess’s commands. Destroying us and restoring that girl are impossible without destroying *her*. And nobody can destroy her!”

“I gave my blood to Ryuuki,” Mephisto said. His voice was a distillation of the night itself. “And so I came to see with Princess’s eyes the thing you said you had to offer. It was *most* interesting. From that, Kikiou, I discovered the art of restoring the humanity of those who have become vampires, without destroying the master.”

“Impossible,” moaned the head of the flabbergasted old man, though the look on his face said that *this* doctor could pull it off. Then the irrepressible intellectual curiosity welled up like a sparkling fountain. “I would like to know this secret as well. How does one do it, Doctor?”

Part Three: The Dancing Monster Mask

Chapter One

The earthy smell and the sound of rolling and kneading clay continued without respite.

Thirty minutes had passed since the old man stated that he would mold Setsura's face into a mask. Every minute—each second—was more precious to Setsura than rubies. And yet he could not look away from the old man's hands, transfixed by his exquisite craftsmanship and his steadfast, even obsessive, devotion to his objective. It was in his nature.

It was perfectly possible that right up until Shinjuku's moment of destruction—even that of the entire globe—he would not budge, and without regrets.

The announcement came unexpectedly, in a voice like the striking of a huge temple bell: "It is finished." He pulled his muddy hand out of the pot.

"Huh. Mixed it just right?" Setsura said, narrowing his eyes. For the time being, he was saying whatever came to his mind on the spur of the moment.

"With the right raw materials, everything is possible. This time, I will disembowel the bastards who imprisoned me here."

"What are you going to do with it?" Setsura said with equally intense interest.

The old man scooped out the clay and piled it with both hands on

the workbench next to him. He looked intently at Setsura. “Well then,” he muttered. “Whose face shall this mask reveal?”

“Can you make do with what you’ve got here?”

“All right,” the old man decided, and his hands turned into finely-tuned mechanisms.

Without so much as a sculpting knife or bamboo turning tool, he drew the face of a comely young man on the lump of clay. He shaped the eyes, the bridge of the nose, and smoothed the cheeks—at an accelerated pace that suggested it was the simplest thing in the world. In reality, energized by unworldly powers of concentration, he didn’t rely on ordinary sight at all. All that was visible was the whites of his eyes.

“Done!” he declared ten seconds later, followed by a spray of red across his forehead.

Whatever in the dense mist welling up outside had called out to Setsura, proclaiming that reproducing that lovely face was impossible, the old man had done it, though demanding a degree of concentration that burst a blood vessel.

But not in vain. Without a doubt, it was Setsura’s countenance carved into the soft clay mask on the workbench.

“I’m impressed,” was all he could say.

“Whose face do you think that is?” asked the old man, turning his bloody visage toward his speechless model. Though the blood aside, his face was actually quite pale, as if the source of the blood had been severed as well. “But you wouldn’t understand. Only put it

on and it will become perfectly clear—which one of you aroused the interest of this uncommon mask maker? *That* is your true face."

His boney finger pointed at the workbench and then shifted to the wall behind Setsura. The finger shook violently. "In a world where they should not possibly exist, I have recreated two beautiful faces. Has my reward for doing so come at last? Touch it with these hands and it would surely shatter. Get that—that mask."

Setsura read the intention in the man's gesture and expression. He turned to the wall behind him, and hesitated. He knew at once what would happen when he wore *that* mask.

The ashen skin, the three red eyes, the hair like needles jutting out in all directions, the thick red lips—pretty much par for the course when it came to monster masks. But add in the six-foot long fangs sprouting from the face, and this design was not exactly the same old, same old. The ends of both were turned up like scythes.

"Get that—"

Together with the bloodless, waxlike skin, deep-rooted delusions haunting his voice grew deeper and heavier. And perhaps only the outlaw soul possessed by the most beautiful young man in the world could respond to them.

With a flick of his hand, the strange mask sailed through the air and fell into the old man's hands. The trembling hands took it, and the old man's face became that of a magical beast.

"Finally." The rumbling sound spilled from the thick lips. It was the old man's voice, but somehow different. "I could not die until I

wore this beautiful mask. Ha! Wear a mask over a mask and what becomes of me? Not even I have yet tempted such a fate. What a fearful thought."

The hands holding Setsura's face were calm as it covered the face of the beast. Setsura stared in wonder at himself. A moment later, a change arose in the old man's body. The normally straight back doubled over.

"Whoa," Setsura said.

With a grinding sound, he literally grew another backbone in order to bear up under the load. The old man frantically tried to tear off the mask. The light dimmed in his eyes.

Setsura's right hand moved of its own accord.

Deadly strands of devil wire sallied forth. The feeling of it biting into flesh was accompanied by a spray of blood.

"What the—"

Setsura gaped at the old man and his two layers of masks—an expression that on this man's face passed for true amazement. The sense of danger arising from the deformed appearance had prompted him to cast a devil wire at this defenseless old man. But the sensation relayed to him next was what surprised him.

The devil wire embedded in the old man's shoulder didn't budge.

"Since being shuttered inside this house, I have carved but one mask: the Dancing Flower Fiend." A red spot stained his shoulder as he searched his memories. "An ogre appears when the peach

blossoms are in full bloom, performing a frightening and entrancing dance. Many great heroes sallied forth to defeat it. None came back alive. Because no weapon proved effective against it. Bury a sword in its side, and a moment later the flesh would turn into something like clay, encasing the blade. A hundred men could stab and slash it, and it wouldn't get cut. All that'd be left for them to do was be eaten."

The two arced fangs jutting from beneath the chin of the "Setsura" mask swayed back and forth. "When he dons my mask," Setsura wondered aloud, "Does he become me? Except the monster mask is underneath. When *I* am added to the mix, does the monster become *me*, or does the old man inherit the essence of both?"

The old man let out a long breath rumbling in his throat like a tiger.

"That doesn't sound good."

A devil wire shot out, and another, one after the other.

The old man laughed, the laugh of the Dancing Flower Fiend, now sporting Setsura's face. He yanked harder, and the wires slipped through Setsura's fingers. Blood welled up. Setsura was able to keep it from slipping further thanks to the almost magical techniques his own fingers possessed.

The old man shook his mask. The red hair—that had sprouted in great quantities at some point—danced like a lion's mane. "I love dancing amidst the flowers. Especially the peach blossoms my kind hates. The villagers go to view the blossoms. I go to eat my fill. Dancing makes a monster hungry."

The old man howled in an unfamiliar voice and began to dance there on the spot. No, it wasn't him. His breath ran hot and cold. The feet stamping on the floor moved almost weightlessly, as if prancing on invisible petals floating in the water.

The white flowers bedazzled man and beast alike. Could anyone perceive the true form of the magical creature through the tumbling blossoms?

The petals blew around the humble abode, as if drawn to the old man's demonic hands waving back and forth. The adobe walls cracked, and transformed into white flowers before crashing to the floor, enveloping the dancer with dazzling light.

Setsura forgot the pain of his own wounds and watched in stunned surprise. If the dead found repose beneath the cherry trees, here was a soul-eating monster amidst the peach blossoms.

Look! Look! said the demon soul.

Look only and ponder nothing and only see.

Look to whence I came. Look to whither I go.

For that is from where you came also.

A curtain of white clouded Setsura's vision—clouded by the adobe walls—no, by a cascade of petals. Crazed flowers and the crazed creature. All it had to do now was gobble down this beautiful village as he was swallowed up by the veil of white.

A crisp, bell-like sound rang out in the air.

Followed by a painful grunt and groan and an eruption of blood. A splotch of red shot toward a corner of the room as the walls came down and crumbled to dust, along with the disintegrating floor and ceiling.

The foundation alone remained intact among the ruins. Setsura stood there by himself.

“That was some fine cutting,” said the bell-like voice behind him.

Setsura didn’t immediately whirl around. The mesmerizing spell of the dancing demon still had a grip on his soul. And then he turned. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to save you,” Princess said with radiant scorn. “The Dancing Flower Fiend is a rare gem, for it once deceived me also. If it looks into your eyes, you will become its prisoner, down to the devouring of your heart and soul.”

“Bugger off.”

This was without a doubt the same old Setsura. Truth be told, he was not entirely sure how he had evaded the ogre’s attack. As soon as his vision was obscured by the curtain of white, a fierce and repulsive sensation blew like a gale through the abode. His body had reacted to it while in that stupor of thought.

Without understanding why, that ill wind became jumbled. In the momentary delay, the opportunity for a counterattack presented itself.

But how to cut something that could not be cut? He didn’t know that either.

“Is this the blood of the ogre?” Princess glanced down at Setsura’s feet. “I have heard rumors, but I have never seen it before.” She did sound honestly impressed. “You wounded it severely. Was that before it began its dance?”

“Naw.” He added, like a poor student unraveling a difficult problem, “I got help.”

“Who was that?”

“Ah. What I do know for certain is that something interfered at the last moment.”

“No one and nothing in this world would call you its ally. And even if there were, the odds of fending off an attack by the Dancing Flower Fiend are slim to none.”

“Fine. Whatever.” Setsura stopped thinking about it and blankly turned his gaze back to her. “You said you came here to help me. Then perhaps you wouldn’t mind taking me to where the prime minister is.”

“That’s what I intended to do.”

“In that case, good,” Setsura said with a nonchalant nod. Princess abruptly drew closer. “What?” he said.

She took hold of his right wrist as he backed away. At first glance, there was hardly anything out of the ordinary about the situation. But imagining a relationship between these two truly stretched the mind.

Setsura hadn’t given her cause to touch him, and Princess was

never so casual about getting close. The heavens and the earth might pass away before the little bundle of pride that was the vampiress would lay her hands on anyone of humble birth without hesitation.

"A lot of blood," she said, gazing down at Setsura's palm. "I can't help feeling concerned."

Setsura went to pull his hand away, but couldn't move it. This wasn't an opponent who could be defeated with raw strength. Nevertheless, not getting an evil vibe from this unusual demoness, he entrusted his bloody hand to her.

"That wound is from your devil wire. Hoh, what a trifling thing."

"What's so funny? Would you like to try it yourself?" he threatened, although his physical strength aside, there was no hint of intimidation in his voice or words. This was the threat of the virtuous.

"I have just the medicine for that," Princess said.

This time, Setsura exerted all his effort and pulled back his hand, tearing open the wound in the process. Fresh blood poured out, but he didn't notice. "I can do without your poisons, thank you very much."

Princess smiled. "What makes you think of poison?"

"How would you propose that I not think so?"

"Even the kind of face that might better stare at clouds from sunrise to sunset knows the nature of his enemy. Don't worry. I am not a woman of such good character that I would pile on the poison

in order to hasten you to an easy death."

"That is certainly so," Setsura heartily agreed.

"So put out your hand."

"I'd rather not." Setsura covered his right hand with his left and backed away.

"What an unreasonable boy, and at your age. Hardly the same person who once sliced me in two."

"That was then, this is now."

"Come here and stop acting so strange."

Ah, such words from the Demon Princess who shook the dynasties of ancient China and toyed with the fates of millions.

To which he responded, "Stop pulling my leg."

Had a man ever uttered such words to this one and lived?

"I'm doing nothing of the sort."

"Well, maybe just a little then."

Setsura slowly extended his right hand. Her slender fingers gripped his wrist like a vise.

"Hey."

"Relax. I swear—on my life. And I've never done that before either." Princess lifted his hand to her red lips.

"Yeah, the bitch is back."

"Shut up."

Princess turned back to the wound and pursed her lips and spit into the palm. Setsura flinched. The translucent saliva burned the wound like hot acid.

“If I didn’t do that, you would end up in your very least-desired state,” she cheerily said to Setsura, as he constrained himself by biting his lip. She painted the skin with her saliva and then raised her own hand to her mouth.

Setsura watched quizzically as the vampire queen bit into her own flesh. The bright red blood spilled over the white skin. Without hesitation, she smeared the pool of blood over Setsura’s wound.

“Huh?” he gaped a moment later. The moment the blood touched the wound, the pain vanished completely.

“When it comes to staunching a wound, there is nothing to match my blood. You should know that. Because those capable of regeneration are the product of blood. Mix even a portion with yours and you would become my servant. Don’t worry. My saliva will prevent that from happening.”

“So I’m saved by spit,” Setsura said morosely.

“Thanks to me the pain is gone, right? Come along.”

Princess turned and walked away.

“Just to be clear, that ogre just now isn’t dead.”

“I know that.”

Setsura shrugged and set off after her.

Chapter Two

"What am I doing? I've got to get out of this city. You too, and the faster the better. This whole place is going up in smoke. Nostradamus prophesied it all. The wrath of God will rain down from heaven."

"Here we are." The uniformed guard escorting the fat, whining woman came to a halt.

"Ah, right."

Tonbeau Nuvenberg cleared her throat and examined the steel bars. They'd arrived at the special detention lockup on the first basement level of the Shinjuku Police Station. In terms of hard and rugged, it was a world apart from a normal holding cell. Even taking the criminal element of Demon City into consideration, only one in ten ended up here, meaning that nothing else could handle them.

Based on the nature and brutality of the run-of-the-mill crook in this city, maybe one in a hundred million matched the same criteria outside Shinjuku.

That was what it meant to be in a Demon City lockup.

"I was getting all ready to skedaddle myself. There had better be a damned good reason for dragging me down here. I expect an apology! In writing!"

"I'll see about that," the officer said with a smile.

“Really?”

“Leave it to me.”

“Much appreciated,” she said, livening up a bit and peering through the bars. “Now, which one of these ne’re-do-wells wanted to see me?”

She was about to take a step forward when a pretty hand tugged on the hem of her skirt. Tonbeau Nuvenberg looked down at the doll girl behind her. “What do you want?”

“This is too dangerous for you to go poking about. Let me handle this.”

“You do have a point there,” Tonbeau readily agreed, stepping back. “You check things out.”

“Yes.”

The girl wrapped in dark green velvet answered her new mistress with an obedient bow and proceeded down the corridor of iron bars.

“I see,” she said three or four minutes later, peering into a cell.

In a single night, the demon had sucked the blood of fourteen vagrants, and then when taken into custody, had requested an audience with Nuvenberg. Now he sat on a cot in a regulation black jail uniform in a solitary cell.

“General Ryuuki,” the doll girl said disbelievingly. “He allowed himself to be arrested?”

“Sure, after wrecking a chameleon,” the officer said, as if it were all in a night’s work. “At that point, sixteen weapons that could

destroy sixteen armored vehicles drew a bead on him. There was a lot of curiosity about what would happen if they unloaded on him. Alas, it didn't happen."

Faced with an array of weapons, he had strummed his koto. As soon as the most beautiful sound in the world flowed though this corner of the night, his would-be attackers froze in place.

"I promised to give up without a fight. In exchange, I requested a meeting with the witch called Nuvenberg who lives in Takada no Baba. If she wasn't available, then the next most powerful witch would do."

The steely voice came from the man at the back of the cell. Before the doll girl could call his name again, he turned toward her and softly said, "I see you came."

"Yes."

"Where is your mistress?"

"You mean me?" The fat lady marched up and, hands on hips, threw out her chest.

"So she hasn't returned?"

"No."

Tonbeau stamped her feet. "Hey, I'm standing right here!"

"Only her head. Setsura Aki-sama had it with him."

"That is—good," Ryuuki said. The doll girl could hear the sincerity in his words.

“Thank you.”

“What is Aki-san up to?”

“He again stole into your kingdom in order to save this city.”

“That is a—”

“He will surely return.”

“A man like him always will.”

“Why did you ask for us?”

“After Miss Nuvenberg’s death, this is Magic Town’s second most powerful witch?”

There was a touch of derision in his eyes, but Tonbeau heartily slapped her immense chest. “The same. Speak your business. I’ll warn you, though. If you’re gonna try and recruit me as a vampire hunter, you’re a little late to the party.”

“I understand. The opposite, actually. There is nothing to hunt. I would like you to destroy me.”

For a moment, it was as if the world had frozen in ice. The two of them looked at each other. The doll girl said to the occupant of the jail cell, “Are you sure about this?”

“I have never been so certain in my life. Ever since the day I was spared by Princess at the border of the wastelands, I have been driven mad by the smell of blood. I would have otherwise chosen death by my own hand long ago.”

“And now you cannot?”

“It is too late for that. This body is resistant even to my own efforts.”

“Such a task would be no less difficult for us. You could reconstitute yourself from a nuclear blast. You no longer can be classified as an ordinary living thing.”

“That is why I requested you. Only you could deliver the coup de grâce to this accursed body.”

The doll girl said, “We have only met once, without evil befalling any other party. Do you remember?”

“Ah, the house of that innocent girl. Shuuran told me about it later. You staked me in the heart.”

“That is correct. Nevertheless, you came back to life. What other methods might we avail ourselves of?”

“I see. So there are none?”

“Only one: vanquish the one who first took your blood.”

“That is impossible.”

“Setsura Aki is attempting to accomplish the same.”

“No matter how powerful the magicians in this city, Princess cannot be destroyed. She will be removed from this Earth when she herself despairs of living any longer in it. And I have never met anyone who desires to live more than she.”

“How enviable,” the doll girl said. “In this city, those people who go on living despite their despair are as numerous as the sands in the sea. If despair alone is enough to wreak the wages of mortality upon

her, then she surely must be cursed."

"The thirst for blood will return to me tonight. It would take only a moment to tear out enough throats to quench the desire. When that happens, I will leave here and shroud this city with the wings of death. Nobody will be able to stop me."

"We can only do what we can do," said the doll girl, casting her eyes downward. "We cannot save your heart or your soul. But a defiled body ruled by a craving for blood—there is much we can do."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Then I leave everything up to you."

No one noticed Tonbeau agreeing until she spoke. "The compensation is always dear, my dears, especially when a murderer is involved. Ten million, for starters."

"Fine."

"That's only to satisfy the cops. Your portion comes to thirty."

"I've no objection."

"Paid up front."

"Everything I had on me was burned. When my body is rotting in the grave, the koto *Silent Night* is yours to do with as you please. It is a great treasure, with which you can reign over the human heart at will. It should be worth a billion or ten."

“Agreed. You all heard him,” she said, grabbing the officer forcefully by the arm. “That man’s koto belongs to me now.”

“Yeah, okay, sure,” the officer babbled, as if she were dragging him off to the altar. “But we’ll need him to sign a transfer of property form.”

“No problem. I’ve been forging signatures since I was in diapers.”

“She is such a dependable resource,” the doll girl said sarcastically. “But how shall we proceed after this?”

“Release him into our custody.”

The officer shook his head. “Absolutely not. A face-to-face meeting is one thing. Releasing a hardened criminal is quite another.”

Tonbeau nodded. “I figured you’d say that.”

She lowered her head like a bull and drove it into the officer’s solar plexus. He dropped like a rock. Before he hit the floor, Tonbeau got her shoulder under his arm and whispered in his ear, “Listen closely, dearie. You’re not a *public* servant, you’re *my* servant now. First, open that door.”

Setsura followed Princess along the mist-swept road. They’d long since passed the point at which the road turned toward the sculptor’s house. He could swear they’d been walking for an hour or more, though he couldn’t be sure about the passing of time.

“How long is this going to take?” he asked.

“Hardly a minute has passed.”

Setsura stumbled a bit. There was no end to the mysteries of China's past four thousand years. But he might as well keep on walking, he resolved uncharacteristically.

"We've arrived." Princess stopped and glanced back at him. "Are you dissatisfied about something?"

"Not at all," said Setsura, looking up at the building towering before them.

The scale—big enough to swallow up five or six of the surrounding houses—was evident through the haze. The windows were few in number and small.

"A warehouse?

Princess said, "The raw materials for the mask makers are stored here."

"The prime minister is inside? Is that any way to treat a nation's leader?"

"Differently than you would?"

"Ah, probably not."

"Compared to the tyrants whose hearts I have stolen away, what passes for this country's king is a field mouse peeking out at the world from the weeds, thankful simply to have a roof over his head."

Setsura couldn't really disagree with that assessment. She opened a wooden door. He went in after her.

Thanks to the windows, he could clearly make out the dim interior. The smell of earth tickled his nose. It wasn't a bad smell—

compared to that of blood.

Inside the warehouse was a wide, empty space interrupted by no pillars, none of the expected crates or boxes. Directly opposite them, thirty feet deeper in, were three big pots in a row. The gray surfaces were covered with cracks. These were period objects as well.

Setsura asked, “Inside one of them?”

“See for yourself.” Princess smiled, the evil oozing out of practically every pore. “The prime minister and the rest of them are in those pots. But that is not the end of it. One body, three pots. Do you understand what I’m referring to?”

“Yeah,” Setsura said in a startled voice. He raised his right hand and drew it across his throat. “You mean this?”

“Exactly. Their bodies—head, torso and limbs—are divided among the three. Oh, don’t be alarmed. They’re not dead. That wouldn’t weigh much on your mind, would it? They are filled with the medicinal waters that quell the pain and prevent decay. I could restore them whenever the whim struck, though it has got to sting.”

“Whaddya want me to do ’bout it?” Setsura asked in an Edo dialect.

“Don’t talk funny,” Princess said gaily. “When you remove the lid, the waters inside will pour out and the body inside will die. You get two chances, the limbs and the torso. If, last of all, the prime minister’s head still remains, I’ll have his mouth reveal the nuclear abort codes. Got it?”

“The concept is clear enough,” Setsura said, his eyes narrowing

to slits, the same look the young shop owner reserved for the ill-tempered old lady who haunted the back alleyways. The kind of look that was rarely ignored for long.

"The same game I played with Emperor Zhou of the Shang Dynasty. His uncle accused me of being a demoness. So I divided him into three pieces and promised that if his head survived to the end, the emperor would comply with every jot and tittle of his slanders."

"What happened?" Setsura said, as if inquiring about his own fate.

"The head popped up on the second try. He only had time to call out the emperor's name before decaying away. And so the dynasty was destroyed."

"I am sure you enjoyed yourself fully."

Princess didn't react to that. "Get going," she said with a complacent smile, pointing a translucent finger at the crude containers.

"One more thing," Setsura said.

"What?"

"How much time is left?"

"There are exactly three hours until noon."

Setsura couldn't help being impressed at the lengths this woman went to to torment the human race.

Chapter Three

All attempts ended in failure.

The morning sun wouldn't reach the underground room even with the shutters lowered. Ryuuki was lying down, a conditioned response for vampires, while Nuvenberg and the doll girl tried every form of simple murder they could think of.

They drove a stake into the heart and cut off his head. But look away for a split second and he'd be all put back together again. Doing the same to his limbs yielded the same result. Strangling, same again. Roasting him with a flamethrower, zapping him with high voltage electricity, ditto.

After five seconds, the blackened skin peeled off and the fresh pink flesh revealed itself beneath.

They prepared a tank of water and submerged him—without effect. He truly was immortal.

"He is a one-off of a one-off," Tonbeau finally said an hour later, throwing in the towel. "Eat him, bones and all—bury him at the bottom of the earth—but I wouldn't guarantee even that would work."

"We might as well try burying," the doll girl said softly, as if attempting to come to a compromise.

"And we'd best to get it done while the sun is up." She checked the diamond-studded Cartier watch wrapped around her ample arm.

“A good opportunity to leave town. Only two hours left. That fissure in the earth is on the way.”

“You are quite right.”

“I’m out of here. I did not come to this city with the intention of being irradiated. What about you?”

“There is still work left for us to do.”

“Right. And who’s gonna stop me?”

“I would never attempt to do such a thing to my mistress’s younger sister.”

“Good to know we all understand each other. Looks like when it came to your upbringing, my big sister covered the important stuff. What about that huge crow?”

“If it wants to leave, I would ask you to take it with you.”

“I thought you were a mere wooden doll, sans tears and blood, but you turned out to be anything but.”

“The person who made me was very special.”

Tonbeau turned down her mouth in a disapproving manner, but didn’t comment further. When she went upstairs and said she was pulling out, Deputy Chief Tanomo scowled.

He’d been put in charge after Chief Kumagaki got turned into a vampire. The mayor had filled him in about Nuvenberg and the doll girl.

“Can’t I prevail on you to do something about that? We can deal

with the likes of those Toyama chaps, but that thing is more than what we're prepared to deal with."

"Like I told you, the best solution we've got at this point is to bury him deep in the earth. True, there's no guarantee he won't vaporize and reconstitute himself somewhere else. In any case, I've done all I can do. Pay me what I'm owed up to now and I'll be out of your hair."

"Take a check?"

"Not a chance. You don't even know what's going to happen to this city. I take nothing but gold, silver and cold hard cash."

"Then cash it is."

"Wait a minute, what are you signing that piece of paper for?"

"This is a payment voucher. Give it to the clerk on the first floor and he'll see to it that you're paid."

"Heh. In a situation like this, count on the Shinjuku cops to do things by the book," Tonbeau said. "I can't help being a little impressed." She tucked the thin slip of paper into her bulging blouse. "Yeah, though you must be keeping your underlings in the dark about that missile. Nice job."

"They were fully apprised of the matter yesterday."

"Eh?" said Tonbeau, jutting her neck out like a plump turkey. "So why aren't you all running away?"

"There are still people left here."

"You mean, *you're* still left here. Don't your lives count for

something? Every man for himself. Even rats are smart enough to flee a sinking ship."

"We are human beings as well as police officers. As long as citizens of this city remain, we will remain. I can't say that all of us adhere to that creed—perhaps twenty or thirty didn't show up for roll call."

"Huh. So there's still a bit of humanity left here. I am so relieved," Tonbeau said caustically as she stomped out of the deputy chief's office and into the shadowy corridor. She glanced down at her feet. "What's this?" she said crossly.

"I thought I would see you off," the doll girl said with a slight bow.

"You really came to stop me, but let's go with that. It's not like I haven't done my fair share of sticking around to the last moment."

"Indeed. You have gone above and beyond the call of duty. I am very thankful to my mistress's younger sister."

As if giving her an elbow in the side, Tonbeau said, "Don't think you can butter me up! I've got no reason to break a sweat for a place like this. This really is goodbye. Though I do feel a bit bad that in our short time together I didn't take more of a liking to you and this city."

"I feel the same way."

"What's with that crow?"

"It's waiting outside. It was flying around searching for Aki-

sama, but I called it back in a hurry."

"Good girl."

The mismatched pair of silhouettes turned toward the front lobby. As they drew closer, the scene became more and more like Shinjuku. Curses and lamentations, the sound of hard objects striking human bodies. Here and there struggles between civilians and men in uniforms, interrupted now and then by blue-white sparks and screams.

Mobile police wearing night goggles and carbon-fiber helmets and ballistic vests were hauling a gangbanger toward the back. Their vests were charred with laser burns, from which purple smoke still wafted.

The sight of a rather large girl (larger than her), with two even larger ruffians in tow, caught Tonbeau's eye. "Impressive. You wouldn't see cops like that even in New York."

"That's Detective Ran Mizube. She's only twenty, but has the arrests of more than thirty hardened criminals to her credit. In the outside world, she would have received at least ten commendations by now."

"She didn't kill any of them?"

"Oh, that'd come to a good hundred."

"What a city."

"This is Demon City. Staying alive here takes guts, strength and courage."

In the hundred feet to the front lobby, the two of them were passed by ordinary thugs with their heads split open; an android with the upper half of its body completely charred, only the polymer and steel skeleton and electric eyes remaining; a half-crab human blowing bubbles as its huge pincer hands snapped back and forth; a man with a dog head followed by a man with two heads.

The faces and uniforms of the officers with them were covered with blood. And yet strangely enough, there wasn't a hint of the expected sad and nihilistic atmosphere.

"Everybody's doing their best. It takes as much effort to die here as it does to live. Otherwise, it would become another place entirely. I suppose Prague is an even more remarkable place?"

"Don't be silly. There isn't another city like this one anywhere."

The two left the building. As soon as they stepped into the sunlight, a shadow descended like a black cloud. "Farewell," said the big raven.

"You take care too," Tonbeau said with a brusque wave of her hand as she set off.

They watched as she passed through the front gates and disappeared into the pedestrian traffic on the main thoroughfare.

"Do you think she'll make it out of here?" asked the big raven.

"She is our mistress's little sister—she'll figure out something."

"I can't tell whether you're sad to see her go or relieved."

"Watch your mouth."

“Oops.” The raven fluttered its black wings in exaggerated chagrin.

“Well, at least she should survive the fate of this city. I guess that is something to celebrate. So, what do we do about General Ryuuki? I don’t suppose he’ll be turning to dust at noon?”

The doll girl turned back to the lobby of the police station just as a gust of wind lifted up her hair, scattering golden light. Overhead, the surly bird cawed, “I’m going to look for Setsura Aki. He is a resident of Demon City, even should this world meet an accursed end.”

“*Nevermore*,” rang out the voice accompanying its departure.

The gust of wind winded its way down the streets of Demon City. The doll girl and the bird were nowhere to be seen. The bright summer sunlight filled the streets. It was ten o’clock. Two hours to go.

The vagrant considered the place nothing short of a godsend the first time he found it. He’d found work outside the ward for three days. When he returned to his hovel near Shinjuku’s Chuo Park, he discovered that, thanks to a downpour two days before, the concrete floor had fallen in. Beneath was a dual-level, underground parking garage.

One look and he decided to move in.

The small building’s collapse had resulted in an almost miraculously rugged balance of rubble and space. For the past three years, it had protected him from the wind and rains of Demon City.

Then a section of the fence isolating Chuo Park from the rest of the world got damaged, allowing the ghosts and goblins inside to spill out with the water. He couldn't keep them from crawling into his living quarters.

He'd carried out all of his belongings that could safely be moved and was about to leave himself when he dropped an amulet—made from a special kind of metal whose odor drove off supernatural sprites—into a hole in the underground level.

Amulets like it were a dime a dozen in Demon City, and were effective only against a half-dozen or so of the smaller monster species. He wasn't that attached to it in the first place. But in a fit of economizing, he went to get it anyway.

Dirt and silt carried by the rain had built up a slope beneath the hole that was fairly steep but preferable to jumping down. Brushing aside the small, fanged creatures, he made his way to the bottom floor of the parking garage.

The water had mostly evaporated, and with the help of the light shining down from the hole he found the amulet soon enough. He'd put it in his pocket when he noticed a flight of stairs leading further down.

The upper level had an exit to the surface. It was so densely packed with rubble that he'd given up trying to use it. Here though, the water had clearly carved out a rectangular opening. He'd avoided the stairs before for fear of what might be lurking under the landing. Now they struck him as an easy way up. Besides, he had his amulet now.

After aligning himself with his quarters on the level above, he made his way to the stairwell. That was when he saw it: a triangular space formed by several huge chunks of overlapping concrete, just to the right of the steel doors. The space appeared as rugged as a bank vault. And like a bank vault, his eyes were drawn to what was inside it.

The gray gloom couldn't mask the gleam of glossy red playing across the surface of the cube, eighteen inches to a side. As he came closer, the crimson glow lit up his eyes like a campfire.

The details drew into sharp focus. The red surface was covered with a myriad of designs: a dragon flying through the air holding a large jewel; a serpent wrapped around the peak of a mountain, about to fight with the dragon; a giant whirlpool draining an entire ocean; and many more.

The freshness and vitality of these etchings were as if the artist had been endowed by the gods, entrancing the vagrant more than arousing in him any awe or fear.

And then another miracle. It was a tragedy in a sense.

He reached out to touch this work of art, and then wondering how much he could get for it, withdrew his hand. Perhaps it was mere greed that saved him.

Thoughts of his only true friend in the world welled up in his mind. One of the many fences and money launderers in Demon City, he dealt in high-quality goods. The vagrant had great faith in his powers of discernment when it came to appraising an object's worth.

For whatever reason, it didn't occur to him that somebody might have left it there on purpose. And he forgot about moving it someplace else. Instead, he immediately climbed the stairs and went outside to find a phone.

The fence rushed over ten minutes later. Along with three thuggish-looking companions. After a bit of menacing, the vagrant led them back to the lair. The thugs all had cyborg enhancements. It wasn't like he had any choice in the matter.

"My bad," the fence laughed. "I hooked up with these chaps yesterday. It's the first chance they've had to make a little money. Hey, as long as everybody goes along for the ride, nobody gets hurt."

In a corner of the parking garage, shrouded in an eternal dusk, the men stopped in stunned silence. Finally one of the thugs asked the fence, "Well, whaddya think?"

"Definitely an antique, and definitely worth a lot. Though I'm unfamiliar with the era. Maybe if I get a better look at those engravings."

The fence moved right up to the triangular box and gently reached out with both hands.

A moment later, the fence was sucked right inside. Or more precisely, no sooner had the fingers of his left hand touched the surface than the rest of his body was drawn in after it—so quickly that only a gust of wind marked his absence—so quickly that it took a long moment for the rest of them to realize what had just happened, and even longer than that for the shock to register.

They looked at each other and asked, “What the hell just happened?”

“Where’d that bastard go?”

“No idea. I think he touched that box thing and got sucked inside it! The pictures, look at the pictures!”

Only in Demon City could a pair of unusually sharp eyes have seen what he saw. In the midst of the black whirlpool in a sea of whitecaps was a small pair of squiggly lines. The deformation was melded right into the design: the two legs of the fence, accurately portrayed down to his shoes.

As they watched, gaping, the legs thrashed several more times, bobbed up to the height of his knees, and then swirled out of sight into the depths of the whirlpool.

The thug who’d been standing closest to the box pulled away and touched his scarred cheek with a shovel-sized hand. He’d heard the roar of the magical sea in his ears and felt the salt spray on his face.

The underground parking garage fell silent. Right before their very eyes, a human being had been sucked into a *drawing* of a watery vortex.

The stunned moment of frozen inactivity was unusually brief. An engraving that could devour people—any pawnshop or antique dealer in Demon City would want a piece of *that*.

A particularly famous one hung in the hallway of Miyamoto Pawn in Hyakunin. It was a painting, a four by six foot canvas filled with a life-sized portrait, now known as “The Upper Half of an

English Gentleman." As the accursed name suggested, the portrait in this picture, hanging in a dark corner of the vacant, broken-down pawnshop, was blacked out below the waist with thick streaks of paint.

Three winters before, a foreigner of unknown origins had left it with Miyamoto Pawn. Over six months, the seven people living there disappeared one by one. A week after the owner vanished, the truth of the situation came to light when a CSI unit found the man's journal on his desk.

His account revealed the mystery of the missing lower half of the portraits, and for a time cast this world in a whole new light.

The pawnshop owner had once dreamed of becoming an artist. He came to believe that the most unnatural part of this most unnatural portrait was not mere poster paint, and if carefully removed, the bottom half would be revealed.

According to the descriptions in the journal, the pawnshop owner waited a month for the painting to be redeemed. Growing impatient, and unable to resist the temptation, he set about "restoring" the painting.

During the three months he worked on it, his parents and younger daughter disappeared. He believed they were abducted or kidnapped and made no connection at all to the painting, only praised it.

The middle-aged gentleman wearing a silk hat and a three-piece suit featured in what he assumed was a work of eighteenth-century art—the red of the lips, the white of the teeth—possessed a vividness no ordinary painting of the era could match.

Two weeks after he broke the curse of the oil paint and revealed the legs of the English gentleman, his older daughter disappeared, and the pawnshop owner began to pay attention to what was going on about him, and the connection between the portrait and the disappearances.

He wrote in his diary of hearing *something* other than his family prowling about the house that day or night. Whether male or female —it was wearing leather shoes or boots.

The realization came three days before his final entry. Many times he had followed the sound of the footsteps, only to find himself in front of the painting when they faded away. That night, his wife was taking his youngest child to the bathroom, when there in the middle of the hallway was a tall Englishman. He opened his mouth and swallowed them head first.

With a look of satisfaction on his face, the Englishman crossed the hallway and stood in front of the painting—from which his portrait had vanished—and was promptly sucked back into it.

The pawnshop owner recorded the truth of what he had witnessed in his diary. But what had happened to him after this last entry was unknown.

Aside from the diary, the investigation team found the painting, the bottom half covered with thick paint, a can of paint in the hallway in front of it, and a brush. From the width of the splatter around the brush, they calculated that it had been dropped from a height of five feet, the same height as the mouth of the man in the portrait.

The pawnshop owner's fate was not difficult to deduce.

The cannibal's portrait still hung in a dark hallway of that pawnshop, a grave look on his face. According to the daredevils and ghost hunters who dared to visit the place, there was no longer any sound of footsteps wandering the premises.

But they would only pass by the painting with their backs against the wall opposite. And to avoid falling victim to its deranged presence, at any sound of sniffing or snuffling, kept their eyes closed tightly, seeing, hearing and doing nothing.

Similar stories were well-known around the city, so it didn't take much time for the thugs to put two and two together. It also meant that they had no good way to deal with the thing.

"The dragon and the snake are still there."

"What if we held it by the places that didn't have any drawings?"

"Naw. The thing's covered with them."

The thugs exchanged thuggish looks. "No way we're taking this thing back with us, then. Let's leave this freak show of a haunted house here."

"Man, what a waste. It'd be worth a fortune otherwise. The fence said so himself. Hey, what if it's only the surface that's cursed? There's probably a ton of valuable shit inside. It's like the stuff on the surface is some kind of security system."

"Yeah, I thought the same thing too. But how you gonna cut through a system like that? It's so old school the fence didn't know

jack about it."

"Let's take it back with us. It can't have been sitting here all along. Somebody brought it, so we can take it. Hey, you, make yourself useful."

Suddenly the focus of their attention, the vagrant stood there stunned.

"You're as up to speed as the rest of us. Come over here and figure something out, before we wring your scrawny neck."

He'd already experienced their strong-arm techniques and didn't want to again. He spent a long time exploring the surface of the box —until he could tell the thugs were getting antsy—and discovered a space on both sides where he could just fit five fingers without touching anything else.

Right next to these spots were a white tiger, fangs bared, and a huge baboon, claws flashing. His face pale, the vagrant picked up the box and turned to the thugs.

None of them saw coming what happened next.

Part Four: Lightning Apocalypse

Chapter One

The “brain” at the heart of the machine could think of things no one else could understand, even the designers who created it. Its neural pathways did not depend on the interactions of proteins and amino acids like those of a human being, but on electrons coursing through the cold circuits of its artificial mind, that gave rise to a human level of self-awareness.

Nevertheless, when it came to the information and the reasons for it sealed inside itself, that consciousness lent it powers of discernment and even a grasp of the “truth.”

Several days before, it had received a set of coordinates from its master control ground station. It knew that the coordinates identified a plot of land twenty-two thousand miles away. It also knew that a hypersonic missile from its launch platform was streaking down at Mach ten, guided by the navigation data it was sending.

When the missile blossomed seventy-two hundred feet above the ground, the targeted city would be instantly heated to a hundred million degrees and reduced to its constituent atoms. Not one of the almost million people living there would be left alive.

The “brain” felt what might be called a pang of conscience. It had never experienced something like this before, and wasn’t sure what it was. With great curiosity, it began to analyze what had sprung into being within its own thoughts—sorrow at the annihilation and destruction of human life at its own hand.

But it still could not grasp the *why*, and so it continued to fine-tune and transmit the guidance data to the missile, maintaining it in its current trajectory.

The city was beginning to realize that something was going to happen at noon, starting with the dearth of ghosts and gremlins and carnivorous rats and twining spiders that normally hassled the shoppers, sightseers and pedestrians.

The night before, drifters sleeping in the back alleyways of Kabuki-cho had been awakened at midnight by a band of blob beasts slithering over them, headed north. This bold bunch of drunks went promptly back to sleep. They told their stories when they hit the bars first thing in the morning, but nobody believed them because they were still alive—despite pointing out the bones of small animals left behind, mixed in with the mucus.

The owner of G Watches in Okubo overslept an hour. He was well known in those parts for setting all the clocks in his shop six hours fast. But that morning at six, every one of those precision chronometers fell silent.

In a corner of a building in Kagurazaka Nichome, a poet lived a hermit's existence. Because the act of putting his poems into material form could physically shake the heavens and the earth, he came to be known as the "literal deconstructionist."

And yet people around the world treasured his words like living pearls. Since coming to this city, his editors had importuned him day and night. That day at dawn, he again picked up his pen and set to work. The stanzas almost seemed to drip from the tip of his pen in

molten gold, while his editors turned gray.

They gathered together the masterpiece the brilliant poet had spent the last ten years working on and tore it to shreds. And yet were even now urging him on to the next.

Before falling into a restive sleep of bloody dreams, those who sought shelter at sunrise in the abandoned undergrounds and sewer systems felt packs of carnivorous rats burrowing beneath them. These were creatures that did not distinguish between human and vampire, and would feast upon a victim until not even the bones remained.

They did not bare their own fangs and set to work, but snuggled up next to them like a stranded traveler seeking a warm bed, or a child returning to a mother's embrace.

Setsura stopped six feet in front of the big pots.

"No using your threads," Princess said.

"Fine," Setsura answered. Already invisible wires were slipping out of his hands. He didn't know how keen Princess's eyesight was, but a sub-micron strand of titanium wire should steal into those "medicinal waters" without raising so much as a ripple.

He soon understood the problem with the attempt. The feedback he received told him that each of the three pots contained a head. *What other tricks did she have up her sleeve?* He sighed to himself.

"I'm beginning to get why Mephisto hates women."

"What are you hesitating for?" Princess demanded in a crystal-

clear voice. “There is no way for you to know what is inside each pot without opening the lid. All you can do is choose. It is a simple matter of probability.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Setsura griped beneath his breath.

It really did come down to a game of odds, he thought, as he pondered the possibilities. A one in a thousand shot. Technically, one in three. Even if he picked the right head last, Princess would no doubt tip the scales once again in her favor. Making him wrack his brains and then plunging him into despair—that had been her goal all along.

The “decision” had been meaningless from the start. In that case, he had to give as good as he got. Right now, not only was he holding a crap hand, but his enemy was dealing the cards.

Princess said, “Just to remind you, the vital organs will remain alive for ten minutes. It’s been five since you stepped into this room.”

“Aw, shut up,” Setsura said with as much flippancy as he could manage.

His hand rested on the leftmost pot. He was acting entirely on gut instinct. He sensed as well that, behind him, Princess was smiling.

“Good choice.”

As if unable to bear the sound of her words, the pot split apart. Inside the fluids spreading out on the floor were squirming lumps—hands and a torso.

Setsura closed his eyes and took a breath.

"One more to go. And two pots left." Perhaps in her effort to stifle her joy, Princess's voice sounded small and hard. "Time is running out, Setsura. Two more minutes to revive that body."

Setsura folded his arms and narrowed his shoulders slightly. He was in distress. Though this distress might seem that of a batch of *senbei* gone wrong, in a different setting, those who knew him would feel the alarm as well. Comely features contorted by deep distress have a certain appeal among men and women alike.

A minute later his eyes opened. As if already steeling himself to the outcome, he grasped the lid of the pot in the middle. This time, the war cry of hell welling up in Princess's breast would be mistaken by no one. The prime minister's head must be contained in that pot.

It's all over, Setsura. Demon City will be reduced to ashes. Ah, the hopelessness. You will hold it forever in your heart as my beautiful slave in the bloody, restless sleep of death and life.

In the midst of her elation, a pure white petal crossed her crimson vision. In the time it took her to blink, the dimly-lit world was lit up by a dazzling blizzard of peach petals.

"What—?"

Princess gazed about amazed. In the corner of her eye, as if in a dream of cherry blossoms, danced the black-robed figure. Hidden behind the curtain of flowers, its face then appeared—

"The Dancing Flower Fiend—and still alive."

Her voice vanished amidst the blossoms. The masked demon that should have been mortally wounded in its confrontation with Setsura. Before Princess could question the reason for its appearance, her brain was intoxicated by the dancing white. She hadn't mentioned that the Dancing Fiend could deceive even herself.

"Which one is it, Princess?" asked a voice she surely recognized.

It was as if every peach blossom in the world had been caught up in the swirling typhoon. Princess's lips moved.

"The one on the right, Setsura," a voice called out.

No sooner had she realized its impossible origins but the confusion cleared from Princess's mind. "Damned Dancing Fiend."

The enemy was hiding behind the peach petals, more like a magical cloud. She sprang forward and melded into the whirling water wheel of blossoms. A resounding *crack* rang out.

The flowers tumbled to the floor, as beautifully as they twirled and swirled.

Now there were *two* black shadows treading upon the scattered peach blossoms. One retreated to the wall of the room. One stood next to the big pots, with Prime Minister Kongodai's head under his arm, the medicinal water dripping from his chin and hair.

"Dancing Fiend, you stole Setsura's face," Princess said, and the masked monster laughed.

The next moment, a line ran vertically down the cinnabar skin. The fiendish flesh parted neatly in two and fell to the ground.

“Ah,” said Setsura. It was none other than his face that appeared from beneath the parted mask. His languid features slightly colored with surprise and understanding. He nodded. “I see. So it was I who hindered your attack.”

At the same time, Princess figured it out herself, the reason Setsura had resisted the dancing ogre’s attack—that could dazzle even her eyes—at the mask maker’s house. Whoever donned the mask took on the soul of the person it represented. The mask maker became the Dancing Fiend, and was frustrated by Setsura’s soul also sealed within him.

That *second* Setsura would have exerted control over the Dancing Fiend as well. Following the other two, it became aware of the dangers *he* faced. Exerting his control over Princess with the dance of the peach blossoms, he was able to extract from her the location of the prime minister’s head.

“I won,” the *other* Setsura said sadly. A dark red thread dripped from the sleeves of his black cape—he’d picked it up at some point—and gathered in a small stain on the floor. “Now you must do as promised in the name of the princess who destroyed three dynasties of ancient China.”

“Fine,” Princess said, with a bighearted bow to the Setsura holding the head.

Setsura gazed blankly at the two. His other self said what he was going to say before he could say it.

“I did not imagine the two of you would show up here, but a promise is a promise, and my word is my word. Prime Minister,

you'll soon be back to your old self. Leave here and do as Setsura Aki wishes. Return the head to the jar, along with the torso and limbs."

She'd barely finished speaking when the invisible threads drew the torso and arms back into the jar on the right. After placing the head there, Setsura took a step back.

The two of him exchanged glances. Princess folded her hands together in front of her chest. Tenting her fingers, she chanted what sounded like a sutra in a low voice. Five seconds later, the jar shook and broke apart. Sitting naked amidst the shards and medicinal waters was Prime Minister Kongodai.

"There's an hour and a half left," Princess said softly. "Exit the village through the front gate and go straight. There you will find Shinjuku. Take care, and watch your step."

"How strange," Setsura said as he approached the prime minister.

"What is?"

"Take care and watch your step? Would you trust a hungry wolf who put on an apron and picked up a knife and fork and promised to do nothing?"

"Hardly."

“Me neither. What are you planning?”

“Nothing. I said you’d better hurry up and get going.”

Setsura shifted his attention from Princess to the *other* Setsura. Something glittered inside their identical eyes.

“Can you talk?”

The prime minister looked blankly at Setsura. Then, seeming to comprehend the question, he moved his lips. His Adam’s apple rose and fell. Nothing came out. Kongodai pointed at his mouth with both hands and again tried to say something.

“Excuse me.” Setsura bent over and politely pushed away his hands and tugged on his chin. The prime minister opened his mouth. His tongue was gone. “No scar or torn tissue. How did you manage that? Is this Kikiou’s handiwork, or Mephisto’s?”

“Please. I could handle that much on my own,” Princess said with a thin smile. “As far as his tongue goes, an unfortunate accident along the way. You’ll have to take him as is. Or do you want to hunt for it? Time’s a wasting.”

“Even without his tongue—” Setsura started to say. He said to the man, his mumbling mouth flapping like a fish, “Prime Minister, can you write?”

The empty eyes looked up at Setsura. He raised his right hand, his forefinger set to write a character in the air.

“The letter A,” Setsura said.

Kongodai understood the question. His finger made a diagonal

line right to left, and then another at right angles to it, left to right.

"Yeah, I figured," Setsura said, giving Princess a long sideways glance. "You've robbed him of the ability to communicate. But there still are ways."

"You really intend to sit him down in front of his retainers and announce you wish to retrieve the nuclear abort codes? He can still nod his head. But who is going to believe anything the half-demented man says? The first thing they'd do is ship him off to the hospital and you to a jail." The smile glistened on her luscious lips.

"Coward," Setsura said. He knew it wouldn't do any good, but couldn't help himself.

"Let's keep this civil," Princess sneered, in all her refined grace. "I have returned the prime minister as promised. I promised nothing about him being able to speak and write."

"A woman who destroyed a nation or three turns out to be a hair-splitting grifter," said Setsura, honestly surprised. He really hadn't intended to bitch about it but Princess was arguing like a child. "Give him back his tongue."

"Gee. Where did it go? I just don't know. One more hour. In that time, you've got to get him out of here and where he needs to go. No loitering about, now."

Setsura looked at the prime minister, at his other self, and at Princess. "Well, remember then." Very much like him, there was no threat in his tone of voice.

"I remember well enough. If I hand it over, you will always come

back to me. And we will get to know each other to my heart's content."

"I'll be taking that other *me* with me."

Princess's fierce gaze shifted to the Dancing Fiend with the wounded hand. "All right," she said.

"You're not going to get in our way after this?" Setsura insisted.

"I swear."

"And don't come tagging along. And no tricks, traps or detours."

"I understand." A wry smile contorted the face of the most beautiful woman in the world.

"Really."

"You are an annoying man at times. Do you *want* me to break my oath?"

"Got it." He put his arm around the prime minister's shoulder and helped him to his feet. "Let's go."

The three made their way to the door. Passing by Princess, Setsura gave her a good hard look, but her alabaster face didn't react in the slightest.

Only when the door closed did she turn around. She said, her voice like warm honey, "Struggle all you want. The spell I have cast over you cannot be undone by the world out there. You will return to me, Setsura, before the nuclear fire of that missile devours you, to this world and to my embrace."

Chapter Two

Mayor Kajiwara had sat hunched forward in his leather chair since the night before. Finally he leaned back and said to the man standing next to him, "Hey, what's the time?"

Thirty minutes before, Deputy Chief Tanomo had raced over from police headquarters. He and the mayor were the only two men in the room. "It's just past eleven forty-five."

The mayor glanced at his own left wrist. "Oh. Yeah. Sorry."

Life flooded back into his pale face and eyes. He truly believed that as long as he kept himself in one piece, Shinjuku would never fall apart. But as the last remark clearly demonstrated, the accumulated fatigue of the last several days was slowly eating away at him.

"Fifteen more minutes. The gates are still locked down?"

"Yes. Several of our officers were wounded in the latest skirmish."

"And none of *them*?"

"The SDF has got the armor, that's for sure. Seems there are monsters infiltrating the ranks. Word is a commander on the other side got an eye and the back of his head chewed off."

"How unfortunate," the mayor said, with a serves-'em-right smile.

The deputy chief of police couldn't help but take that as a good

omen. They were about to be boiled alive, and the mayor would be meeting it with his fists raised. There wasn't another ally in this world worth having at the moment.

But the reality of their situation couldn't escape him for long. Tanomo said, "Is there anything the citizenry can do right now about the sealed gates?"

"We've made thirty or forty calls this morning alone, lodging protests with every outside agency we can think of. I've got people still on it. But I don't think it'll do much good at this juncture. This is Demon City. When you think about it, what can be worse than simply living here?"

"Well—" Not certain of how to answer that, Tanomo's voice trailed off. Then he said, "Well, what doesn't kill us makes us stronger."

Though even he'd admit it sounded pretty dumb when he said it. In less than fifteen minutes, a nuclear blast was going to unleash a tidal wave of energy on their heads. Useless chest-thumping wouldn't do much good.

"There are rumors of a nuclear missile strike, probably because of all the clairvoyants in this town. Most people don't seem inclined to believe it. Or if they do, figure whatever will be will be. Compared to the reality they face every day, it simply isn't a very realistic threat. I suppose that could be called one of the redeeming graces of this place."

"I agree completely." The mayor stretched. The springs in the seat of the executive chair creaked.

“And the missile?” Tanomo asked, returning to the more pressing matter at hand.

“We’ve run the gauntlet with the outside world and have nothing to show for it.”

“In any case, I suppose not dying in a screaming panic provides some consolation.”

“Sure.” Kajiwara massaged the knot out of his right shoulder. He got a La Aurora Double Corona out of the cigar case on his desk and bit off the end. With a cool and collected gesture, he lit up his last smoke and puffed away like a smokestack, as the deputy chief of police looked on admiringly.

The mayor drew a deep drag and exhaled a small cloud of purple smoke that drifted through his office. The cloud floated intact toward Deputy Chief Tanomo. Before he could react, a blue-white flash bolt of lightning struck him on the shoulder. With a stifled cry, he leapt backwards. A pencil laser sprang into his hand from the cuff of his right sleeve.

Kajiwara held up his hand. “Relax, relax.”

“What the hell was that?”

“A practical joke. Thought I’d break the tension, that’s all. A new item in the souvenir shops. It’s called a *Thunder Cloud*. A pleasant sensation?”

“More like getting scalded,” said the deputy chief of police, pressing a hand against his smoldering shoulder and doing his best to contain his anger.

“Hmm. Sorry about that. A stern warning should be delivered that the voltage regulator is out of adjustment. No wait, make that a fine. It’ll help balance the budget. Seems every knickknack shop in Shinjuku has contracted to stock the things.”

The cigar Kajiwara was holding, and other items of the sort, could just as well be manufactured outside Shinjuku. But when it came to toys on the somewhat dangerous side, “Demon City” had established itself as an important brand name. Shinjuku’s Office of Trademark Licensing received requests not only from within the ward but from around the world.

The foresight of the first mayor of Demon City, who’d registered the name, was praised to this day.

“With all due respect, Mr. Mayor,” the deputy chief of police interrupted him, as he applied a handkerchief to the injured place.

“What?”

“I may not look it, but I have been going out with the patrol officers twice a week. Not to pat myself on the back, but I’ve walked the beat around the DMZ a good thirty times.”

“Thirty-four.”

Kajiwara’s reply caught the veteran police officer momentarily off guard. Tanomo cleared his throat and broke the spell. “Go *there* ten times and you will lose your fear of death. Instantaneous death by nuclear missile might even be said to be easy by comparison. If you don’t mind me saying so, Mr. Mayor—”

“I’d rather not have to think about *that* place right now,”

Kajiwara said, as if chewing on a bitter pill.

Allow himself to vent his personal feelings in ward council meetings, and since the beginning of his administration he would have been clamoring to pour every exorcist and battalion of shock troops in the world into Chuo Park. Except that, as the chief executive of Shinjuku, he'd signed off on ten times the regular budgetary expenditures in order to preserve this most dangerous place on earth.

Thanks to its name and existence alone, tours around the high perimeter fence brought in twenty times as much traffic every year as visitors to the Imperial Palace, not to mention the fees collected in the process.

"What were you saying?"

"In other words, I guess what I'm asking is, in the face of such premonitions of death, why are all the people so resigned to what is going on? From what I can see, it's something more than mere bravado or a drug-induced euphoria."

"So we've played all our trump cards and still lost the pot." Kajiwara swiveled his chair around to face the window, gazing at the sky or the city. As a spectator, he would first look at the sky.

"And what about those cards up the sleeve?"

Kajiwara couldn't help feeling more than a tad self-satisfied at the echoes of inquisitiveness and relief in the man's studied tone of voice. A moment later, that sense of satisfaction rapidly faded, and the ineffable emptiness pressed against the mayor's abdomen.

His gaze shifted to the distant rooftops of the city. Somewhere out there was his beautiful last ace. “There’s one left.” He might as well do the one thing he hadn’t done since the day he’d come to this city. “*Namu Hachiman Daibosatsu*. Glory to the God of War, incarnation of the Great Buddha. Let the dream of Setsura Aki come true.”

The intercom buzzed, bringing his prayers to an end. “What?”

In an atmosphere thick with foreboding, “Setsura Aki would like to see you.”

Kajiwara’s eyes flew open wide. “Is he alone?”

“Yes.”

Kajiwara felt like collapsing on the spot, but somehow kept it together. “Show him in.”

“Yes, sir.”

In the time between the intercom cutting off and the door opening, Kajiwara was sure his secretary was playing a bad joke on him. Setsura could not be alone.For the sake of his own good name, he could not have returned alone. And yet he entered the room alone.

Chapter Three

Upon leaving the village, the three figures came to a halt. Two of them were Setsura and one of them was Prime Minister Kongodai. The man in the black slicker pointed with his right hand, the direction Princess promised would take them out of this world.

The third figure, also wrapped in black, slowly set off, walking less like he didn't feel good than as if he'd been severely wounded.

Watching him disappear down the desolate road, the man in the slicker turned to the naked man next to him, who was presumably Prime Minister Kongodai. With Setsura in the lead, the two of them set off toward a forest on the left.

In the shade of the overhead branches and leaves, the man in the slicker waved his right hand. Something leapt out from his fist and wound around a branch. The two of them rose magically into the air.

Flying through the air like a pendulum, he flicked his wrist and waved it again, interrupting their arc, shifting their motion, carrying them deeper and deeper in.

Many minutes later, at the end of a long arc, he spotted his objective—the manor house standing elegantly near the shores of the lake—and allowed himself a casual smile.

Princess's abode.

The pendulum reached the extent of its arc. He cast out another wire—and suddenly felt no resistance on the wire. Falling from a

height of over fifteen feet, they landed softly and silently thanks to him casting out a second safety line. The naked man safely under his arm, he focused his attention on the severed end.

"But of course you chose my home," said a voice behind him. He turned around to find Princess hovering ten feet in the air, gazing down at him. "Or rather, Doctor Mephisto's. As you surmised, he's the kind of chap who could fashion a new tongue. Or even without a tongue, could make the silent speak. But I won't allow it."

"That's not what we agreed," Setsura objected, placing the prime minister behind him. "Who's the big bag of wind who positively swore not to interfere once we left?"

"Once you left, indeed. But here you are hurrying to find Mephisto. I can interfere all I want without contradicting myself in the slightest."

"You've got your directions mixed up."

"How's that?" said Princess incredulously. "Then who was just headed that way? I thought it a simple feint, but supposing you sent your double there doesn't change anything. Are you Setsura or the Dancing Fiend?"

"As far as that goes, you're not following him, are you?" Setsura grinned.

A small spark of doubt flared in Princess's breast. Soon after they'd left the warehouse, she exited via a window and followed them. As things stood now, Setsura must have concluded that returning with Kongodai would do no good, and so attending to his

health would be the best move. The best man for the job was Mephisto.

Outside the village, they'd split into two groups. Though the black-clad man must have been the Dancing Fiend, Princess couldn't see the point of sending the ogre to the outside world. She sensed a diversion, but if he was going one direction alone, it was clear the other two would be going somewhere else.

However a mystery this nonchalant young man was to her, she didn't see him stooping to pointless ruses.

A moment later, two possibilities occurred to her: the man heading to the outside world wasn't the Dancing Fiend but was Setsura or the prime minister. From her vantage point, if Setsura could don the mask of the Dancing Fiend, then even the frail prime minister could be reborn as that beautiful genie.

And yet the fact that they were headed towards her manor house told her that the prime minister must be the prime minister. And while the prime minister's head hung heavy on his chest, mostly hiding his face, this Setsura was, at a glance, clearly Setsura.

So Princess had followed them.

Ultimately, she chose the two over the one because of the speed with which they had flown through the forest. Fretting over whether one was the ogre and the other was Setsura would only cost her time.

But now that she was here, Setsura's smile and words again raised doubts in her mind.

"No matter who the other is, he will be of no use in the outside

world, as long as you remain here. Give it up, Setsura. The only one welcome in my house is you."

"Sorry about this."

The air hummed. Red crosses covered Princess's body from her head to her waist, from her right side to her left, and then disappeared.

"If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times," Princess jeered. "It has no effect on me." Her gleeful expression faltered. She tried to raise her arm but her hand didn't move. "You—"

"Now you are honestly fit to be tied," Setsura teased in turn. "I can't cut you, but I can bind you. I finally figured that much out. There's still time. Mephisto should be able to fix him in five minutes."

"You son of a bitch. Let me go."

Princess writhed with all of her strength. But the tree the wires were wrapped around bent no further than her arms could stretch. No matter her supernatural strength, she couldn't free herself. Knowing what happened during the fight at Mephisto Hospital, this was a trick only Setsura could pull off.

"I really do wonder what would happen if I plunged a branch through your heart. But lucky for you," he said, as if she really should be grateful, "I haven't got the time right now to conduct any experiments!"

Setsura threw an arm around the naked man—his head still hanging down—and jumped into the air.

“Wait, dammit!”

Princess’s cry quickly faded into the distance. The manor house was located at the edge of the forest.

“I still gotta wonder if this is gonna work,” Setsura said to himself. He sensed something above him and looked up.

“Yo,” Yakou said, thirty feet in the air.

Black light burst from his right hand. With a snap of the little finger on his right hand Setsura released the wire, and the two of them sprang vertically upwards. The black shuriken buried itself in the ground, just as half of Yakou’s right wing sheared away, the work of the second wire cast off by his pinky.

Yakou tumbled off balance. Setsura called out, “Into the woods! Princess needs you!” He fell back into the canopy of the forest, shifting out of the way before colliding with the branches.

Glancing up at the sky, he set off at a run. Yakou was still after him. Seemed he could do well enough with clipped wings. Princess must have communicated through her telepathy the absolute urgency of stopping Setsura first.

“*He* should be arriving soon enough,” Setsura reminded himself. All he had to do now was run out the clock.

He dodged left. Yakou was hot on his heels. No matter where Setsura went, he would be waiting, his eyes burning with a monstrous blood lust. Yakou reached into the right pocket of his jacket and released a black round tube from his hand.

As Setsura flew through the air, the seals broke apart and the tube became a swarm of black balls.

“Shit!”

Setsura’s slicker fluttered like feathers. Missing by a literal hair’s breadth, the balls struck the ground below. Flames billowed upwards, and not all at once.

Striking the ground at an angle, the explosions spread out like a crashing freight train. In an instant the fire spread out, enveloping the trees and bushes. Every living thing seemed to erupt with incandescent light. The sounds and shapes of monsters and gremlins writhed and disappeared.

Setsura spun his slicker as the wall of fire crested over him. He hoisted Prime Minister Kongodai onto his back. This was the only protection he had on hand. It repelled the flames. But some stuck.

“Ouch! Dammit!”

Running entirely on instinct, he twirled the slicker again and landed on the limb in front of him. Then looked back. “Good grief,” he said without even thinking.

The pursuing inferno was no longer in pursuit. Ten feet behind him, a tree burned furiously. The hot wind struck Setsura in the face. “You okay back there?” he asked.

His face still cast down, Kongodai didn’t answer. Confirming that he wasn’t burned anywhere, Setsura peered up at the sky. He couldn’t see Yakou. It wasn’t likely that Yakou had lost them in the flames. He was likely lying in wait with his next bag of tricks.

“Where did you scamper off to, One Winged Yakou?” said Setsura, succumbing to a rare bit of name-calling.

He cast out a wire behind him and got an improbable response. The wire had severed. Not only that, faster than he could renew the attack, some kind of fabric wrapped around Setsura and Kongodai and bound them to the branch.

“So something still comes from the pricking of my thumbs.” Princess appeared from behind the tree in front of him and stopped in midair. “You are bound by a strip of my own clothing. The more you struggle the tighter it gets. And if you attempt to free yourself —”

The report of a gun erupted from the base of the tree. A bullet grazed the branch over Setsura’s head.

“You look familiar,” Setsura said to the man in the suit holding the firearm, Kongodai’s bodyguard, Sejika.

“He was wandering about the forest, saw me and came closer. At that point, I only needed to look him in the eyes.”

Not waiting for her to explain her predicament, the bewitched bodyguard—once her inveterate enemy—had shot off the big branch the devil wire was entwined around and set her free.

“That one’s an unearned run!” Setsura shouted.

The one who answered was Yakou. “Give it up,” he called back, swooping down from the sky.

Part Five: Going to the Devil

Chapter One

"So, the sadistic minx and the traitor," Setsura observed calmly. "It's a good old family reunion."

Facing off against these two was trouble enough, not to mention that waiting for him below was another quisling with a gun.

"Checkmate, Setsura. Give up. Receive Princess's favor and affection as I have. You cannot begin to comprehend the joys you will thereafter partake of."

"Have you looked in a mirror lately?" Setsura said to the triumphant Yakou. The particular quirks of this young man were such that intrigue suffused the question, not the expected stresses and strains. "Chasing tail and getting led around by the nose. What a fool a man makes of himself trying to impress the wrong sort of woman. Your father would weep to see you now."

"Shut up," Yakou raged in return. Though his will was under Princess's command, his memories remained fresh.

"Hah. Where there's anger, there's promise. You should have your head examined by Mephisto as well."

"Idiot," Princess rejoined in wry amusement. "As long as you are not going *there*, we might as well kill him *here*. But promise to become my servant and I will spare the politician. Though only after Shinjuku has burned to a crisp."

"Why are you so stuck on this servant business?" Setsura asked

plainly. “Talk about one-track minds, looking at people and saying *servant, servant* over and over. So what do you do with these servants anyway? Short on doormen? Butlers? Chippendale bathhouse attendants?”

“What’s that?” she asked Yakou.

“I have no idea.”

Setsura harrumphed. “You’re not very bloody useful, are you?”

Princess said, the words dripping from her mouth like hot honey, “Your fate is set in stone. You will tend to me every night in my sleeping quarters. A glorious privilege. Zhou of the Shang and Jie of the Hsia obediently pledged their lives to me and received untold delights in return. I will give the same to you.”

“Princess, that is—” Yakou unexpectedly interrupted. “That is *my* role, to say nothing of the proper order of things. Why *this* man, of all people?”

“It is decided,” Princess said scornfully. “He is a hundred times more handsome than you.”

In the face of such coolly-stated and undeniable reality, Yakou was at a loss for words.

“You sure are hot to trot, Yakou. When are you gonna shake the scales from your eyes?”

“Be quiet.”

“The scion of the Toyama vampires is a fool for love. Except nobody would think *that’s* funny.”

“What are *you* going to do, Setsura? Stay here, all safe and warm, or attempt to safely escort him out of here?” She dared him as if the promised break would be complete.

“You keep talking about *him* so dismissively,” Setsura observed, glancing at the face of the gasping man on his back. “Perhaps you first ought to make sure you know who *he* is. As for us, we’re going to get our wounds taken care of.”

And so he played *his* trump card. Princess realized it several seconds later. The corners of her eyes lifted and she shouted, “Yakou! Look! That man’s face!”

The winged man plummeted down and grabbed the man’s head by the hair and jerked it up.

“No?”

Setsura smiled at the shocked demoness. Princess’s trembling hand pointed at him. “You picked up two masks in the mask maker’s village. The first was to drive away the villagers. The second is *that* one. If that man was the prime minister, there would be no need to transform him. Go to the manor house and I shall be nipping at your heels. The man in black you sent to the outside world—*he* was the prime minister?”

“Elementary, my dear Watson.”

“In which case, that face is the Dancing Fiend sporting *your* mask. But why go to such lengths? Had you left this world, I would have seen you off as promised. And that gait truly suggested a wounded man.”

“The wound was equally shared,” Setsura calmly explained. “The same as the Dancing Fiend. The same severity. It would have been best if we’d switched masks after leaving the house. But it took a little time convincing the ogre—the old man—he *wasn’t* me. Then the prime minister became me. Because he was *me*, he believed what I had to say.”

“You’re saying you are not in fact Setsura but this country’s head of state?”

“Though I can hardly say for sure myself.”

“How would the Dancing Fiend—the mask maker—play the part of the prime minister? A stroke of luck his face agreed with his name, but I do not think he could pull off the role so easily.”

For some reason, this observation left Princess in a good mood. Yakou was left to stew on his own.

“All of the masks remaining in that village are those of the villagers,” Setsura said. “Excepting him, the mask maker. I convinced him by letting him carve my face.”

“So you appealed to his sense of aesthetics?” Princess smiled and covered her mouth with her hand. “Yes, the man I insist must be my servant! But why send the prime minister alone to the outside world? Did you intend to bring Mephisto along afterward? Or has Demon City had a better doctor all along?”

In that instance, Yakou’s expression changed. “Princess, he has done nothing of the sort!”

“What?”

“Setsura has deliberately been keeping his distance from the manor house. He’s been buying time for the prime minister to get there!”

The light in her eyes changed in a flash from cool surprise to incandescent rage. Setsura’s relaxed grin smeared into a blur. In that same instant, Yakou’s wings separated from their joints. A startled voice descended downwards. The hands of the bodyguard dropped off at the wrists.

“He’s here!?”

Writhing in the air, Princess’s back was sucked up against the trunk of the tree she had appeared from behind.

Tearing the fabric he’d severed from around his torso, Setsura shouted in midair, “Idiot! Go!”

A short ways off, the branches creaked. “The manor house! Follow him!”

Princess’s order was aimed at Yakou. He bolted and then was flung back, red lines running across his chest and right knee. “Move and they’ll cut deeper, Yakou. Could you revive yourself minus your head?”

The web of devil wires wrapped around him must have come from both Setsuras, trapping the wingless vampire as if in amber.

“Fool!”

Princess shook her body. Whether pure rage, or a martial art, everything in her vicinity trembled like a mirage. The trunk snapped,

shattered, and disintegrated to dust. The invisible wires were reduced to their constituent atoms. Her clothing met the same fate under the force of the unimaginable vibrations.

When the outlines of her body returned to solid form, she was naked. Perched on the large limb, Setsura stood there for a stunned moment. So did Yakou, beneath him.

Tantalizing flesh, and a body to entrance the mind, darkened only by the dusky triangle between her legs that she made no effort to conceal.

Princess laughed in a high loud voice. “The body that stole away the souls of emperors and kings! Setsura, do you wish to challenge it too?”

Chapter Two

The body that stole away the souls of emperors and kings. And not only them. Exposed to the full light of day, it could even have robbed the gods of their senses.

Her neck, shoulders, breasts, waist, ass and thighs, down to her ankles and toes, were all the more beautiful than before, none of them lacking the true essence of beauty in the slightest way. Her skin glimmered as if baptized in the secret fragrant oils of eternal youth, cloaking her in unmarred brilliance.

The sensuality and lasciviousness that encompassed her body like a flowing rainbow, together with the mesmerizing movements of her limbs, brought to mind an expression of divinity conquered by devilishness.

Setsura and Yakou exchanged glances of blank amazement. Princess laughed again.

She hid nothing, Everything—from her breasts to her armpits to her rich, black bush—was on display. And yet, not only was nothing about her touched with bawdiness, but her presence left an almost cool and refreshing feeling of white clouds streaming across an endless blue sky above a deep green countryside.

This wasn't simple beauty, nor was it ordinary voluptuousness. The flawless beauty of this woman—who had destroyed nations, entranced kings and slaughtered their subjects—was the incarnation

of evil, the perfect reflection of a soul loyal only to her own desires.

"Feast your eyes on this, Setsura," she called out, as if to throw not only her voice but herself at him. "And fall into my arms." She spread those arms wide and waited.

And Setsura—perched on the big limb—Setsura blinked two, three times, and took a casual step towards her. That monster of jealousy, Yakou, had a crush on her down to the marrow of his bones, and even now his intoxicated expression didn't waver.

"Yakou! Go!"

As if struck by an electric shock, the man in the black three-piece suit took off for the manor house. A glistening trail chased after him, only to disintegrate in another burst of intense vibration.

"How about I stay here?" Setsura said, watching Yakou's back. Princess's reprimand seemed to have brought him back to his normal self.

"And leave you behind? Idiot," Princess said with a smile. "I have at least plumbed the depths of your mind. The kind of mind who would go out of his way to hide a dead body while starting a world war. I could get to like you."

"What a nuisance." Setsura frowned. "Let's get down to brass tacks, shall we? I don't exactly have a lot of time."

"As far as your wire-wielding friend is concerned, I have no worries. He has certainly arrived at where you wished him to go. The question is what happens after that. Kikiou is in the manor house. You haven't seen them for yourself, but his private army is there too.

Besides, there's no telling if that doctor you trust so much can do what you're counting on."

"I believe he can." Setsura believed in the man he casually called a quack.

"You say with such cheek," Princess scoffed. And then she said something rather strange. "But how will it turn out? Let's find ourselves a seat and watch the show."

"What? You're not going to do it yourself?"

Princess wordlessly raised her hand and pointed in the direction of the manor house. Her hand seemed to absorb the light of the sun, scattering the light across her chest.

The manor house bustled with forces mustered to meet these unexpected intruders. The black-clad figure burst into the hall. A swarm of lizard creatures flew at him. In a flash they were sliced to pieces.

"You'd better come out or the same thing just might happen to you."

"You are in awfully good spirits," said the doctor in white, descending the staircase from the second floor. Three of the supporting pillars had been severed. The sections anchored to the ceiling leaned at a dangerous angle. When no answer was forthcoming, he said, "What, cat got your tongue?"

Instead of nodding, "Setsura" opened his mouth. Mephisto peered in. "Hoh," he said. A patient and a doctor who could both say a lot with a little. Setsura shut his mouth and Mephisto said in a

strangely soft voice, as if a shadow had suddenly shrouded the world, “So I take it you are not Setsura?”

Setsura folded his arms, drew his brows, and with a confused expression on his face—nodded—as if to say, *no*, but in fact, *yes*.

“Hmm. You can’t say for certain yourself. You do seem the real thing.” Mephisto silently inspected the black-clad man. He swept back his cape. “Had you presented yourself to me in such a form, you should have received your just dues. But seeing as you have come for treatment, you are my patient, and I will do what I can. Come along.”

So this Setsura wasn’t Setsura after all. He’d donned the mask carved by the Dancing Fiend and wrapped the black cloak around him—this was none other than Prime Minister Kongodai.

But why had he returned to this world after leaving it? “Setsura” had convinced him—the Setsura who was not Setsura but was in fact the prime minister. Restoring his voice required the skills of the Demon Physician secluded in Princess’s mansion. Having drilled that into his head, Setsura sent him on an outward trajectory. Then while he set up a diversion with the Dancing Fiend, the prime minister was to sneak into the manor house.

But the prime minister had taken a detour on his way there to save Setsura after Princess bound him to the tree. His current consciousness told the prime minister that he couldn’t abandon *himself* when *he* was in danger. His ambiguous reaction when revealing his true identity to Mephisto was a consequence of the same.

One of the Dancing Fiend's skills was that a mask imbued the wearer with the characteristics of the person represented. Mephisto had seen through the facade soon enough. There might have even been the touch of a smile in his voice as he made the invitation.

The two of them entered a room on the second floor. The room—a cross between a laboratory and a doctor's office—was stocked with tools and mechanisms that were all a curious fusion of the ancient and the ultra-modern. In the center of the room was an examination table, already occupied by a pale body. Setsura's expression shifted.

"As you can see, I am currently treating a patient," Mephisto said, as if to convince Takako Kanan of the fact as well.

Restore the half-vampire human to fully human without destroying the sire. The Demon Physician had taken up the gauntlet of slicing through a Gordian knot no one had ever cut before. Setsura/Kongodai was equally intrigued by the challenge before him.

"Humans don't turn into vampires because of a poison, but because of a curse occasioned by their behavior itself." Mephisto's voice was the crystallization of a dark winter's night. "The breaking of such a curse is not the province of science. But she shall be treated."

He said it would and so it must be possible. This was Mephisto, after all.

"And when will that occur? Does not your face and soul pose the question, wearer of Setsura's face?" When the black-robed man nodded, Mephisto said, "Then let us tell the real Setsura, my client

who requested this treatment."

He did a half-turn and stared intently at Setsura's face, who retreated a step without realizing it. Mephisto grasped his hand. "To tell the truth, were you to insist that you were you, even I would harbor doubts. I do not charge my patients, but for the crime of reproducing his face, I shall demand a fee."

A countenance inhumanly handsome approached one of otherworldly beauty. Anybody could have imagined what would come next. But an unexpected interruption occurred just before those two faces melded together.

"Sir Mephisto," called out an older man.

The urgency in the voice made Mephisto turn around. The great warlock was no longer only a head. Four "legs" jutting from his thick tube of a body raised him five feet off the ground. The joints of the "pelvis" and "knees" and "ankles" flexed and bent with an impressive dexterity as he scampered up to Mephisto.

"What do you intend to do with him? However irreplaceable *you* may be, Setsura Aki remains our sworn enemy, our unlucky star. Do not forget that. A friendly reception is the last thing he deserves. Stand aside and I shall deliver the coup de grâce."

"This man is my patient," Mephisto replied, meeting the blood-red loathing in Kikiou's eyes with cool resolve. "No matter the shape or form, he who seeks the help of Doctor Mephisto shall remain in my care until a complete recovery has been achieved."

The great warlock fell silent. The desire to sally into battle

burned brightly, and such a contest would have created a most interesting spectacle, but he turned his thoughts in a different direction.

"Forgive me. This old man is cursed with a short temper." The half-human bowed his head.

Mephisto answered with a silent bow of his own, then said to Setsura, "Have a seat over there." He indicated a chair in the corner of the room. "Make a tongue? Or swap voice boxes? It won't hurt. The former will take a tad more time. The faster the better, I presume? Though it will take a bit of time getting used to."

Setsura bobbed his head.

"A fake, but the substance is the same. I don't know whose handiwork this is, but there are many frightening people in this world."

Mephisto seized Setsura's jaw, the light of pure intrigue shining in his eyes. For a moment, a *what-the-hell* look flashed in his eyes. Then he obediently raised his head, exposing his pale throat.

Mephisto was a vampire. Only one thing could follow. Except that it didn't. All that trailed down the skin was a white finger. Setsura hunched his shoulder. Because it tickled.

"You must suffer, unable to speak on your own." Any sense of danger vanished from Mephisto's expression and tone of voice. This was the Doctor Mephisto that always appeared before a patient.

His finger stopped on Setsura's throat. Without the slightest sign of tension on the skin, the finger sank down to the second joint.

Anybody would have started with surprise, but the finger withdrew before he could blink.

Examining the throat and finding not even the hint of a scar there, Mephisto asked, “How do you feel?”

“Hey, watch where you put your hands.”

“Good.”

As Setsura put his hand to his own throat as if making fine adjustments, Mephisto stepped back and said to Kikiou, “The treatment is complete.”

“That was impressive.”

The old man’s gaze was wrapped with icy bands of destruction. No matter what the realm, Kikiou now defined himself by his desire to destroy Setsura. He said, as if unable to wait any longer, “And now he isn’t your patient?”

“He is as you say.”

“Then hand him over to me.”

“I will do nothing of the sort. That is a topic you must take up with him.”

The white cape whirled as he turned his back to them and returned to the operating table where Takako Kanan lay. The sense that this was not the real Setsura was strong within him.

“Shall we do it here?” said Kikiou, still unaware that he was addressing Prime Minister Kongodai.

“Suit yourself,” said the prime minister, still unable to convincingly say that he wasn’t Setsura. “But how did you end up in such a sad state?”

Faced with eyes filled with honest sympathy, the veins stood up on Kikiou’s head. The only part of him right now that had any veins. The sight of him simultaneously sent a chill down the spine and tempted the observer to break out laughing. If the space allowed, adding a few more legs to the tube beneath the head would be even funnier—a caricature of robots from centuries ago.

After the body that Mephisto had previously fashioned for Kikiou had been destroyed on the bus, he’d had to make do with a temporary body he made himself. Which was bad enough, but facing off against the man who’d robbed him of his original inflamed his rage all the more.

“This is the Doctor’s sanctuary. Setsura, let us step outside.”

“Sure.”

Having become Setsura down to his thoughts and memories, Kongodai was no less confident. The assurance that he was the prime minister, kindled inside him with a single word from Mephisto, was now blown to the wind. Any uncertainty in his lucid face vanished. He accepted the challenge.

Supposing he was Setsura—*if* he was Setsura—he would certainly be aware of the gravity of the situation. In less than an hour, Shinjuku would be consumed in flames. A person closely connected with the dangerous state faced by Demon City would be having a stroke instead.

“Where are we going?” Setsura asked.

“Just shut up and follow me.”

Clanking and humming and buzzing, Kikiou exited into the hallway. Mephisto saw them off with a glance, and without another word, bent over Takako.

Chapter Three

Kikiou's "body" raised a tremendous clatter as he guided Setsura along to a room filled with stones.

Not ordinary flagstones. Though man-made, these majestic "mountains" each rose to over six feet tall. The peaks of one were wrapped in mist. Down the slopes of another coursed long and narrow rapids, kicking up a fine spray, as if the great undiscovered waterfalls of the world had been miniaturized and collected here.

The columns and picture windows appeared now and then, but it truly created the feeling of being amidst the soaring mountains and deep valleys of another world.

Setsura couldn't help smiling at the refreshing cool touch on his skin. "Impressive," he murmured.

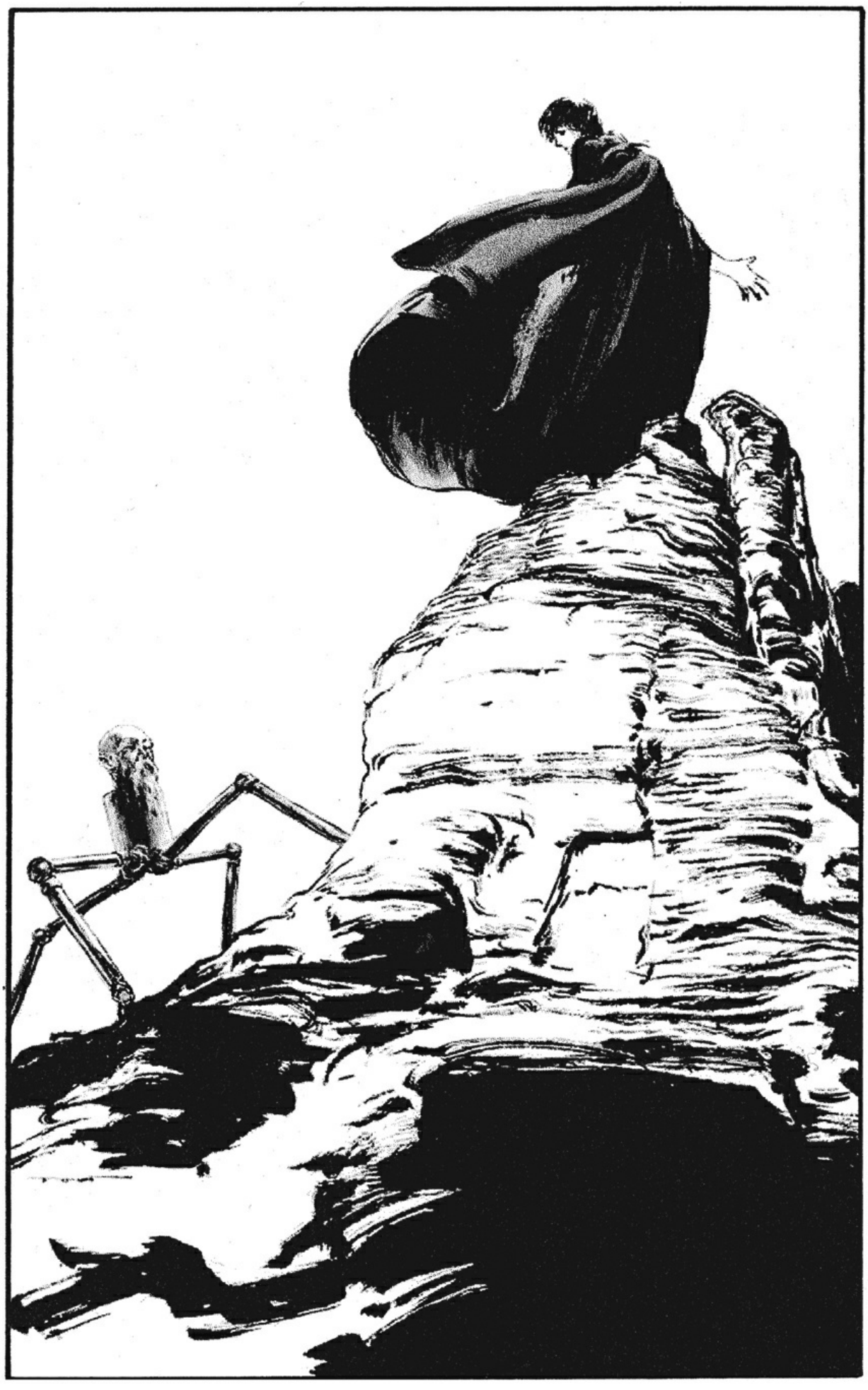
"So you appreciate the view, eh? Let's get down to business."

With a springing sound, Kikiou leapt onto a rock fifteen to twenty feet away. His metallic legs had five toes on the ends of their feet that would not seem to provide them a firm purchase on the smooth, damp surface. But they stuck fast as glue, a tribute to the wizard's inventive mind.

"Impressive," Setsura said again in open admiration.

If Mephisto were there, he would have been impressed for entirely different reasons. His tone of voice, the way his articulated his lips, was pure Setsura. No one could have believed he was the

sitting prime minister in disguise.



“You get up there too,” Kikiou said, pointing at a rock next to Setsura.

“Naw.”

“What?”

“Never a good idea to start a fight where your opponent has the home field advantage. I’ll stay here.”

Kikiou momentarily showed a dumbfounded expression. Then his lips twisted into a smile. “Either way’s fine with me. Remain where you are. I will go up.”

“Go ahead.”

The air hummed. His next word on the subject was the deadly lash of his devil wire. This was the beautiful genie’s curt declaration of war.

Kikiou’s head disappeared—sucked down into the tube of his “chest.” The devil wire sliced through empty air. The strange torso and legs sprang blades.

Reeling the devil wire back without cutting anything, Setsura appeared slightly perplexed.

“Surprised?” came Kikiou’s very particular voice from inside the tube. “My torso and legs are made from ore mined on Mount Penglai and refined for a hundred years. Not even Xiang Yu’s mighty sword could scratch its surface. Neither will your devil wires.”

“That’s for me to find out, I guess,” Setsura said. Small sparks lit up on Kikiou’s body and legs. Direct hits by the devil wires, so

fierce that a blue fire enveloped him.

"Idiot."

The ground beneath Setsura's feet crumbled. In a flash, the mist shrouding the peaks of the rocks was far below him, covering not only the foot of the "mountain" but engulfing the floor like a sea of clouds.

He didn't have time to jump back. He fell. There was no floor beneath him, only the white clouds. The devil wires sprang from his fingertips and lashed around something. He rebounded from the impact and then fell back again and stopped.

"Beware a false sense of security."

Now was hardly the time to intone stock catchphrases.

A stiff wind blew the mist from around Setsura. "Whoa," he said, despite himself. He was surrounded by several thousand feet of empty air, though the scene before him suggested something more akin to tens of thousands.

A craggy mountain wall soared upwards six feet to his left. His devil wires wrapped around a pine tree twenty yards above him. The trunk of the tree jutted outwards, keeping Setsura away from the wall. With every gust of wind he swayed back and forth.

He looked down. Beyond the cottony clouds were smaller peaks. Further below were winding blue lines. Rivers. He could let go and enjoy a good five minutes of uninterrupted free fall. It must be one of Kikiou's illusions.

Loud laughter thundered through the air. The pine tree swayed. Small stones grazed Setsura's nose and fell out of sight. A huge Kikiou rose from beneath the clouds.

"Game over," he roared. His voice shook Setsura like a bagworm moth in a windstorm. "Cut that wire—pull out that tree—and you will fall forty thousand feet to your death. Need I say more?"

"Um—" said Setsura, hanging there by one hand.

"What?"

"Is this reality?"

"Not at all," Kikiou quickly answered. "A complete illusion. You are only a few inches off the floor. As far as your body and soul are concerned, though, you are truly at an altitude of seven and a half miles. Let go and see for yourself whether a few inches is the same as a few thousand feet."

"As if."

Kikiou's smile deepened. A giant arm reached out, larger than the heavens or the earth. A red cross welled up on the tip of its index finger, staining the world red. The rush of blood spilled down like those mountain waterfalls, the roar shaking the firmament, and vanished far below them. From that crimson world rebounded a human-shaped red dot.

Setsura flung a devil wire around another tree higher up the wall of the cliff. From there he switched directions, evading Kikiou's eyes. His objective all along.

“Bastard!”

The bloody finger scraped against the cliff wall, opening up a horizontal fissure. The rock face crumbled like pie crust, tearing the tree out by the roots and sending it cartwheeling through space.

Tracing a graceful arc, Setsura’s trajectory abruptly spun out of control. “Whoa,” he shouted. From a height of tens of thousands of feet, he fell like an ominous black bird to the ground inches below.

A moment later, the air whirled about. Rolling to the horizontal like a gymnast, he was caught in a pair of black arms.

He looked into his own face, a single drop of blood on the tip of his own nose. “There you go,” Setsura Aki said, as if meeting a long-lost friend.

“But of course, the mask of the Dancing Fiend—that a mere human was able to cross swords with Kikiou to such an extent,” said Princess, sincerely impressed.

“Princess—that is—?” cried out Kikiou. He was perched on the rock—on top of the miniature mountain—his head now exposed. “I was about to defeat Setsura—him. Why did you not clear such obstructions out of my path?”

Kikiou was almost at a loss for words. He knew she was a whimsical woman, but to exercise that whimsy at a time like this?

“Ah, he pulled a fast one on me, and did it with the leader of this country and the Dancing Fiend to boot. I am *so* intrigued. So I decided to grant his wish.”

“His wish? What wish?”

The great warlock looked back and forth between the two Setsuras, trying to grasp what Princess was getting at.

“Besides, Kikiou,” she said with a smile. “Your overwrought attempts to vanquish this Setsura failed. Because, in any case, he holds the fate of Shinjuku in his hands.”

“What are you talking about?”

“According to the reckoning of the outside world, a nuclear missile will destroy Shinjuku today at noon.”

“What?”

Even Setsura, the real Setsura, was a bit surprised by this particular revelation—that Princess had not told Kikiou of the threat faced by Demon City.

“W-When were you informed of this?”

“Oh, a long time ago.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were so attached to the place I thought reducing it to ashes might do you a little good.”

“W-W-What do you mean—?”

“You’re so startled. After all the time we have spent together.” Princess laughed silently. “What about Mephisto?”

“An attack from the sky was expected,” the man in white said from the back of the corridor.

“Your divining powers must have been on hold.”

“Definitely, but—”

“Enough. The pretender he’s holding will save your beloved city. Setsura, Mephisto has apparently finished his treatment. I don’t imagine there’s a second to lose.”

“Now and then you do say the right thing.” Setsura put down the Setsura he was holding. “Do you understand, Prime Minister?”

“Yes.” Kongodai/Setsura nodded.

“As soon as you arrive, have Mayor Kajiwara remove the mask. And then follow his instructions.”

“What if I remove it here?”

Setsura cast a sideways glance at Princess. “Best you keep on your toes until you leave this world.”

“I understand,” said Kongodai/Setsura with another nod, and set off in the direction they’d come in.

“When you leave the manor house, take the road west. That is the fastest way.”

“Understood.”

“That is a lie!” Kikiou shouted. “Princess, this is no time for such capriciousness. The exit is to the east!”

“Of course,” said the other Setsura. He glanced at Kongodai/Setsura. “Nice to know that somebody has our backs in this world. You’d better go east.” As his double set off at a run,

Setsura glanced at his watch. “He should make it.”

“One way or another,” agreed Mephisto. He was, after all, a resident of Shinjuku. “What comes next, Setsura?”

“I say it’s time to bring out the wrecking ball.” He glanced from Princess to Kikiou to Mephisto and said with feigned ignorance, “Seems we’re one short. Hey, Yakou!”

Princess called out, “Yakou, you should have arrived already.”

“I don’t suppose he stopped by the blood bank on his way in.” Setsura suggested meaningfully, “Something must have happened.” But nobody agreed with him. “Boy, you’re a cold-hearted bunch.”

“I shall go find him,” Kikiou said.

Princess was taken aback by the offer. “Hoh, now you care about what happens to Yakou? Fine. Off you go.”

“Princess, you must take care not to let Setsura out of your sight.”

“Like I don’t know that already.”

Kikiou answered her radiant smile with a dim look of disbelief, and then with a parting *I-won’t-forget-this scowl* at Setsura, left the room.

“Really think he’s going to?” Setsura asked Mephisto.

“No.”

“Me neither. Better not leave him to his own devices.”

“And where are you off to?” Princess asked curiously.

“Oh, you’ll see,” Setsura answered with innocent eyes.

Setsura/Kongodai raced through the forest. He wasn’t running along the ground. Since leaving the manor house, his feet hadn’t once touched the ground. Rather, what appeared to be a black cloth pendulum traced out a successive series of arcs.

As he approached the opposing crest of an arc, Setsura would cast off an invisible wire to a branch dozens of yards in front of him, swooping like a swallow in flight.

Swinging above the treetops, he could make out the escape path Kikiou had described. Taking a shortcut, he was conquering the distance at an accelerated pace.

A strange kind of discord seized his chest. Two personalities and two minds—he was Setsura Aki and he was Prime Minister Kongodai. Through the magical powers of the Dancing Fiend’s mask, Setsura Aki’s mind and personality controlled his body. At the same time, Setsura was persuading his true self—the prime minister of Japan—of the absolute necessity of stopping the noontime missile attack.

Persuaded him, but without true comprehension. Setsura didn’t fully believe he was the prime minister, but neither could he deny this desperate desire to save Shinjuku.

That might explain the shadow that crossed his face, and why the sunlight playing across his features lost its tints.

Regardless, he would act as if convinced entirely, and had every intention of leaving this world and continuing on to the Shinjuku

ward government building.

A cool sensation touched his spine. His heightened senses—in his capacity as "Setsura"—reached out around him. The presence of pursuers, fifteen yards or so behind him. Eight in number.

Glittering objects flowed to his left and right, like scythes, suffused with an intent to kill. He instantly selected a sheaf of devil wires—also transferred to him from the real Setsura—and scattered them behind him. Each about two feet long, a thousand threads were drawn into the currents of wind raised by his pursuers and should make short work of them.

He felt the bursts of pain radiating from his targets. Three vanished.

"Hoh," Setsura said.

Five more continued after him, without hesitating or slacking in their speed. Such endurance was hard to believe. Soon they were swinging from tree to tree using only their limbs. They were speeding up and steadily closing the gap.

"Whoa," Setsura said next. He let go of the devil wire, trusting his trajectory to the centrifugal force carrying him forward. A cool sensation grazed his back. A scythe. He dropped thirty feet toward the tall undergrowth, gently coming to a halt just as he plunged in, six inches above the ground, braced by devil wires cast out to trees on either side.

The threads set about performing their next duty, raking through the undergrowth around him. Flashes of silver shot down from the

treetops and disappeared in the undergrowth.

Then came the savage roars as two gray objects fell backwards to the ground in mists of blood. Two dull thuds, then silence.

Setsura didn't move. Disturbing the grass with the devil wires, he'd invited the attack then traced back the trajectories to the location of the enemy, and unleashed a little hell of his own. Two more down and three to go. But that trick wouldn't work twice.

A small bag floated down from the canopy. The grass wavered. Then soon settled. Setsura heard a faint sound. He couldn't make out what it was at first. Then he knew.

In a flash the grass collapsed, shrank, and disappeared. In the air, a mass of green specks, darker than the undergrowth, grew exponentially. Straining his eyes, a mist seemed to coil around blades of grass, to the stems and roots—a great swarm of tiny insects. Thousands, tens of thousands, millions of them, devouring the plant fiber with their mincing jaws.

According to the *Compendium of Demonic Insects*, published in the Ming Dynasty, during the Hsia, Shang and Zhou dynasties hermits thought to bear the blood of both man and ape often showed up in the mountain hamlets to trade and barter. One of their most popular—and highest-priced—items were "hungry bugs" that cleared wild land for cultivation by consuming every weed and tree root.

What Setsura heard were the sounds of consumption.

In the shadows of a large limb, three hirsute hands regripped the

handles of three scythes.

Setsura felt the dull ache in his toes, the pain inexorably ate into his bones. On the verge of losing control and thrashing about—three gray shadows tumbled from the treetops raising bloody yells, into the middle of the wasteland that had suddenly appeared there.

The quivering bodies contracted almost instantly, the flesh torn asunder, the organs chewed to bits. Then disappeared, not leaving a single drop of blood behind.

Setsura dug the tips of his toes into the ground, crushing the source of the pain, and darted off through the underbrush. Moments before the assault would have proved successful, the enemy had been felled by person or persons unknown. It was hard to believe that he had allies in this world. And if this was another foe, it was a far more powerful one.

The thought occurred to him to retrace his steps and finish the job. He was still Setsura. But that thought soon vanished. If by chance he really was the prime minister, only thirty minutes remained until the destruction of Shinjuku.

Part Six: The Puppet Masters

Chapter One

Setsura's feet stopped in sync with the next word out of his mouth.

"Eh?"

Ten yards ahead of him, an old man in Chinese dress was sitting at the base of a big cedar tree. A log lay at his feet, eight inches in diameter and six feet long. The old man seemed to be taking a break from a busy schedule. Puffs of smoke rose from a long, thin hookah.

"Best to let sleeping dogs lie," Setsura said, detouring around him to the left, which only prompted another exclamation.

The log was lying there in the grass. The end on the right butted against the old man's feet. But it was now fifteen feet long. Checking to make sure he wasn't being followed, Setsura said to the old man, "May I pass?"

The old man held out his right hand, like he intended to collect a toll.

Setsura searched his pocket. "Sorry," he said. Had Kongodai's consciousness been present, he would have bitten his lower lip in chagrin.

Go that way, said the old man's gesture.

"This presents a bit of a problem. I really need to go *this* way."

Setsura walked to the right. He would circle around the old man.

Another surprise—the log inched along like a big worm, past the man and the tree, blocking Setsura's path. It looked like it could stretch another hundred or thousand miles as easily as another dozen feet.

"Well, that's what four thousand years of Chinese wizardry will get you," Setsura said to himself. "How about an IOU?"

The old man smiled and shook his head.

"Stubborn old goat. Guys like you are way worse than the typical enforcer." An invisible thread shot into the air. "Now, if you would excuse me."

He rose into the air. And just as rapidly the log grew in diameter.

"Well, shit."

As he rose vertically, the gray trunk of the tree swelled to completely block out his view. The branch he'd wrapped his devil wire around was beyond the log. They collided.

"Oh, good grief."

He let go. Landing softly on the ground, he found himself face to face with the wrinkled, kindly old man, his leathery hand outstretched again. The legendary tax collector of times gone by. Setsura could tie him up or knock him out, though the powers of this tree probably operated independently.

At this point, he was running out of options. He was about to cast out a devil wire and stopped. The old man certainly harbored no doubts about his own actions, and Setsura didn't want to inflict any

pain on that wrinkled, smiling face.

Setsura turned around and started to say, “Why don’t we talk about—”

He hadn’t finished the sentence before the old man spun like a top and puffed up like a balloon. And a second after that, popped and blew apart.

Setsura jumped a half-dozen yards down and away. Fresh, red pieces of meat and bowels scattered at his feet. He leapt for cover behind another pair of cedar trees.

Only someone exercising a powerful *qi* could disintegrate a person like that, without a sound or a shot.

“That you, Yakou?”

No one answered. The tree resumed its original shape, and then it too silently shattered. It was becoming clear that he had an invisible but frighteningly powerful bodyguard.

Setsura sprang to the left. A gaping hole appeared right in front of him, without scattering so much as a grain of dust. Apparently, his bodyguard wanted him to get a move on.

“Much appreciated,” he said, and set off running to his destination.

A figure reared up on a rocky crag a hundred feet from where the exploded old man had set up his “toll booth.” It was Kikiou. He was wrapped in a long gray robe, but the black steel limbs poking out of his sleeves revealed his true form.

He had twice come to the rescue of Setsura/Kongodai. But the eyes watching as the black-clad young man disappeared out of sight burned with hatred and loathing, the lips curled with the taste of bitter dregs.

"Go. Save Demon City from destruction. That place is our destiny, our bloody Shangri-la. I shall protect it, no matter the means."

Applause welled up behind him. He whirled about in surprise. Here was the rest of the all-star team.

"What a performance, Kikiou," Princess said with a luxuriant smile. "I couldn't miss it."

"The kind of proactive attitude I like to see in our senior citizens," Setsura observed nonchalantly.

Only Mephisto looked silently and without expression.

"How long have you been following me?" he said, his face as white as a sheet of paper. He could not have imagined such a humiliating scene.

"Right after you left the manor house. Relax. Our missing Yakou turned up as we were headed out. Seems he chanced across a lost old woman who gave him a bum steer."

"Well, well, well," he said at last. "It's about time the *real* Setsura and I settled our differences once and for all. Shall we?"

He was hardly asking permission. The smoldering anger and humiliation had reduced the great warlock's scientific mind to a

raging brush fire. What he wanted from Setsura was a place to let it all out.

A look of anger grazed Princess's features as well, and transformed into a smile of unimaginable evil. "Have at it. I'll watch. Don't hold back."

Apparently when it came to covering for Setsura, she'd had a change of heart.

"You sure?"

"Fight," she said bluntly.

"Fickle as a cat."

Setsura had no objection to taking out an enemy. He stepped away from the group and faced Kikiou. When one fight was over, it was time for a new fight to begin. That was how anybody living in Demon City counted the hours and the days.

Setsura's devil wire?

Kikiou's *qi*?

The treetops swayed.

The wind blew.

In the midst of the forest, floating in currents of sunlight, an icy killer vibe bathed the figures of an old man and a young man.

But then in no uncertain terms Princess stepped in to stop this otherworldly combat.

"What's going on?" Mephisto asked.

“Something’s happened at the manor house. The consciousness of those two leapt out at me.”

Those two?

The three there besides Princess each harbored different doubts. And all came up with the same name. Her telepathic connection with Princess was a product of her vampiric nature.

“What has happened to Takako Kanan-san?” asked Setsura, with a questioning glance at Mephisto. This whack job of a doctor must have been concocting one of his quack treatments, and his look said as much.

The transfixing face of the doctor in white was as immovable as the darkness.

“That bastard Yakou. I’m honestly surprised. I was going to have Mephisto restore his wings, but before that, I’ve got *this* to deal with.”

“What kind of *this* are you referring to?” Setsura broke in, for once talking as fast as a normal person might. Carrying on a conversation with her was sheer torture. *Ask about Takako, get told about Yakou*. Such behavior rose out of his sense of irritation.

She shut her eyes. “Hoh, the room given to Mephisto? It is burning. The floor, the ceiling. And the room with the stone walls, they’re melting. You mixed up some mighty curious compounds, Mephisto. What are those arms and legs? I recall seeing them somewhere. Oh, aren’t those Kikiou’s? What fine kindling they make. And who is the culprit? There she is! Standing there like

Venus on the Half Shell. What magnificent breasts, Setsura. So ripe at that age. How many men would be entranced by those full, pink hips? Wouldn't you count yourself as one of them, Setsura? But she is a beast. She threw that stone table across the room with one hand. And just missed Yakou. Stuck to the ground without his wings changes the equation. He must be fit to be tied. Shall we sally forth to save them, Setsura?"

Setsura fixed his gaze on Mephisto. "What did you do?"

"I treated her."

"And the result is a fight with Yakou? I had my doubts before, but you really are a quack."

"Rather than argue about it, let the results speak for themselves."

"If it quacks like a duck—" Setsura turned toward the manor house.

"However mad she might be, she will follow my commands," Princess said with undisguised pleasure, knowing how that would rattle this young man, who otherwise deported himself like an eternal summer evening.

Setsura stopped and turned around. "You would do so in a constrained manner?"

"Hardly."

"Bitch to the core. That's a four-thousand-year-old spinster for you."

"Kneel before me and plead, and I will do all I can to appease

you.”

“I’m too beat for this shit.”

He kicked against the ground and started running. A voice brushed against his back like a quiet flute. “But can you?”

He stopped abruptly and whirled around. Princess and Mephisto were facing each other. “What did you say?”

“I only wondered if you could.”

“My servant will heed my commands.”

“Your servant *apprentice* might be the better term.” Mephisto’s face and expression revealed absolutely nothing. “Hence the effectiveness of my treatment. Did you order that outbreak of fury?”

“No,” Princess softly responded, though a dangerous tone colored her answer.

“Has the cause of her rage been quenched?”

“No.”

“Sir Mephisto,” Kikiou said, as if to interpose himself between them. This great Machiavellian was actually sweating. “This debate aside, I have my puppets inside the manor house. They can certainly control a single mad woman.”

“And you should certainly try.”

Setsura couldn’t help noticing now that Mephisto was actually enjoying himself.

“Then do it. Know this, Mephisto: if Takako obeys, I alone will

scorn you for the rest of eternity.”

Chapter Two

“I would have expected nothing less,” Mephisto rejoined.

Kikiou responded with a hopeless look on his face.

“Suit yourselves,” said Setsura, and sprinted again toward the manor house.

Only Kikiou spared him a parting glance. “To the manor house alone, eh? Not only have they unbound that evil star, but opened the door and invited him in. Princess, I must return as well.”

Princess ignored the old man sulking like a recalcitrant child. She closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the look would have caused any lesser of a person to shrink in fear. She scowled at Mephisto.

“What did you do to that girl?”

“I treated her,” he said, as if resuming the same line of inquiry that Setsura had started.

“And will she follow you?”

“No.”

“What?”

“It is a natural phenomenon arising in the course of treatment, not something that anybody could have prevented, nor should anybody try.”

“Hoh.” The murderous temper faded from Princess’s eyes.

Observing that, Kikiou said with evident relief, and no longer able to refrain, “I’ll be going.”

His head still slumped, Kikiou galloped off. Nobody watched him go.

Princess continued, “If we stand by and do nothing, the manor house will be destroyed. If she runs into Setsura, she will attack him regardless. She has the soul of a devil today.”

“Wouldn’t you consider that a stroke of good fortune, Princess?” Beneath the blazing sun, Mephisto’s features were cool and serene. “Setsura wishes to save the girl. She will exhaust every effort trying to kill him. If that wouldn’t gladden a tormentor’s heart, what would? If we’ve the time to stand around here and debate the matter, Princess, then let us repair to the manor house with Kikiou and observe the contest.”

“You do have a point,” said Princess, her lips twisting into a small smile of satisfaction.

A shadow passed across the sun. It was as if, within this forest, two unimaginably dark wills had found their kindred spirits. Princess raised her hand and touched Mephisto’s cheek. To imagine he would allow such a thing, even were those slender fingers fashioned from the most precious rubies.

“I realized it just now, Demon Physician, how beautiful you are.”

Was this how she took a liking to something? Her speech and tone of voice hadn’t changed, but there was an aura in the air and a

scent on the breeze, so dense and penetrating that a bystander would have been knocked for a loop, suffused inside and out with all the symptoms of a deep lust and longing.

If she said *stand*, he would stand. *Kill*, and he would kill. And if she so desired, fuck her for a hundred days and nights without ceasing. Such was the nature of this rarest of all harlots.

Her finger traced a rainbow on that beautiful cheek—that must be thought of as a fond work of Mother Nature herself—until he grasped it.

"Mephisto." In her voice were the indistinguishable echoes of desire and disgust. Her red lips opened slightly as they approached his.

Only the sharp force radiating down her finger stopped her. "Am I meant as a substitute for Setsura, Princess?"

Mephisto softly let go of her finger.

"Of course," she said, just as calmly.

"Such words come at a price. Becoming one of you gave me access to a great store of knowledge. Knowledge is a two-edged sword."

"Nobody is more aware of that than I am," Princess said. "Don't imagine that I spent the last four thousand years raiding hospital beds. Schemers and dreamers, wizards and alchemists, geomancers, necromancers—they all challenged me. They all failed. Then came the scientists and sages and mathematicians and theologians. Every one of these wise men bowed down before me, overwhelmed by what

I knew. Knowledge polishes the lens of self-confidence with the cloth of pride. I wear it like a fine garment, its reflection in the mirror a thousand times more grand. It makes comprehensible the heavens in their courses, the changing of the seasons, the hearts and souls of men. Perhaps that should concern me, but what might be gained from ten thousand books and centuries of experience dwindles to dust with one look at my breasts. That is how it should be. That is what it means to be human. Mephisto, are you even alive?"

"Well—"

"I know—the nature of your predilections, the extent of your beauty, the personification of an accursed perfection that exceeds even Setsura's and yet that loathes the female sex. It is well, Mephisto, that you should return having partaken of a separate knowledge here. Go, to the manor house. Hoh, the pleasures only increase."

Setsura entered the manor house through a window on the second floor. From the forest to a tree in the courtyard, wrapping his devil wire around a banister on the third floor, he became a bird in flight.

The hallway was wrapped in black smoke. His objective was Mephisto's laboratory, specifically the adjoining room. Flames poured from the door. He got there in a little over five minutes. Strangely enough, nothing else along the way was scorched or scarred. The ruggedness of Kikiou's handiwork was something to behold.

The heat beat against his face. He soon encountered Yakou.

“Good job,” Setsura said.

“She’s in there,” Yakou said, not turning around.

The air howled within the spouting, crimson flames. The experimental apparatus and mechanisms fused together in odd shapes and wavering silhouettes. Setsura cast out a devil wire and cocked his head to the side.

“She is sitting in the midst of the fire in the lotus position. She seems to be enjoying herself.”

“You’re kidding.”

“See for yourself.”

Setsura gave Yakou a push. Yakou twisted around. “I was tending to my wings when she grew restive. I don’t understand why.”

“The reasons may be unclear, but the screw-ups are obvious.” He looked at Yakou’s back. “Thinking you could slap a Band-Aid on that was pretty naive to start with. A pair of pigeon wings would be a better fit for a man who can’t handle a single girl.”

“She isn’t the same as the rest of us.”

More than the words, the way he said it caught Setsura’s attention. “Meaning what?”

“Though we will recover, fire will scorch or burn us. Does she bear any scars at all?”

Yakou seemed to have grasped that Setsura’s devil wires told him as much. However a captive of the enemy he might be, the Elder’s grandson was still working on all cylinders.

“No.”

“On top of that, her strength is a thousand times my own. And if you ascribe her actions right now to madness, such a mental maze might be unraveled, but the physical aspects remain a mystery.”

“And if we extinguished the flames?”

“Why do such a thing, when not a single hair on her head is singed? Right now, the better course is to observe. What is she doing?”

“You are beginning to resemble a certain doctor.”

The irritated Setsura and passive Yakou stared at the whirlwind of fire. Two seconds later, Yakou said, “She’s moving.”

Setsura noticed that as well. Takako stood up and was walking toward them. What had she accomplished sitting in the lotus position?

A woman’s unblemished arms materialized from the curtain of combusting chemicals, followed by her breasts and face, and thighs and legs. It was undoubtedly Takako Kanan.

She looked at Setsura and smiled, flashing her unsightly fangs. “We meet again, Aki-san. No, *Setsura*-san. There are so many things I want to do with you. Such *nice* things. Once and you’ll never go back.”

“True enough, Setsura,” said Yakou, jabbing him in the ribs with his elbow.

Setsura answered with a return jab of his own. Gazing at Takako

with his always languid eyes. “Who is your master now? That woman or that quack doctor?”

“Neither. I belong to me. My will is your desire, Setsura-san.”

Her breathing was labored, this beautiful naked young woman continually aroused by her own passionate desires.

Yakou spun around behind Setsura and pinned his arms behind his back.

“What are you doing?” he asked, though not in a panicked manner. Neither did he attempt to jerk free.

“You are an obstruction between me and the woman I love,” Yakou said, and Setsura didn’t doubt a word that he said. The vampire looked perfectly serious. “Princess is stuck on you. That makes you my rival.”

“You definitely spent way too much time in England,” Setsura griped as Yakou dragged him ever closer to Takako. “Whether love or infatuation, being able to blurt out stuff like that without chagrin is evidence enough. Pretty soon you’ll be going on about even more embarrassing things like chivalry and manly pride and camaraderie.”

“You know nothing of love,” said Yakou, tightening his grip. “I will kill you in order to protect my relationship with Princess. I will disobey her, if that’s what it takes. Drink his blood, Takako. Or slit his throat.”

“Yes.”

Takako’s hand clapped down on Setsura’s shoulder. Then reached

further, striking Yakou in the chest. The greatest of the Toyama vampires flew backwards and struck the wall and fell to the floor.

This was truly amazing power.

“Ouch.”

“Soon it will feel so much better. Everything will.”

Yakou’s command to kill seemed to have gone in one ear and out the other. Takako’s lips shifted toward Setsura’s neck.

“Stop!” cried Kikiou from the door.

Takako shouted back in a rage, “Don’t interfere!” More the bellow of a beast than human language.

Pushing Setsura aside, black pincers closed around her outstretched hand. This hand had emerged from beneath Kikiou’s long robes. The four limbs appeared to be legs, but half bore hands on the end.

“Old buzzard.”

Putting distance again between herself and Kikiou, Takako seized the pincer at the joint with her free hand and threw it into the flames as easily as tossing a hammer.

“Criminy,” said Setsura, jumping back six feet. When Takako whirled around to find him, he added, wrapping his wires around her body, “How about you teach me about all those good things later?”

“No. Right now.”

Takako thrust her arms out to the side. The titanium net silently

shredded into pieces.

"But of course. A different life form."

Setsura shifted strategies. He'd strike at her pressure points. He doubted it would work, but he might as well try.

He didn't have to. As she closed on him, the black hand rose out of the flames and grabbed her and raised her high into the air.

"Let go!"

Takako reached behind her with both hands and tried to grasp the steel arm, but Kikiou learned from experience and his engineering adapted to new circumstances. He seized her at an angle and in a place she couldn't reach.

An aperture in his torso opened like the iris of a camera, a motor hummed, and a hypodermic needle jutted out on a hydraulic arm. It looked very old school, like something he'd built a long time ago.

The mechanism plunged the needle into the base of Takako's skull, injecting the vial of yellow fluid into her brain.

The lower half of Takako's body lifted up, and then forcefully swung back down again. The joints of her arms separated. The grating friction of steel against steel made Setsura put his fingers to his ears. Takako's body shook violently. The sound grew louder. The joints shattered. The black arm set the naked lady down next to Kikiou.

The ancient robot retreated on two legs. In order to avoid the heat, the head had turtled into the torso. Now it popped out again.

“It seems the doctor has a fondness for practical jokes of his own. He wrecked one of my toys and fashioned it into a facsimile of her, and one hardly lacking as an opponent. There is no way Setsura can be allowed to join the same family as Princess, not even according to the whimsies of Doctor Mephisto.”

Takako turned over. And with a fluid back kick that would impress a karate master—a talent she acquired from who knows where—not only sent Kikiou skidding backwards, but inflicted a sizable dent to his body.

The old man grimaced. Something in his torso buzzed like stripping gears.

Takako reached out toward Setsura, her hand beckoning to him. As if pulled along behind her hand, her body fell forward.

“Holy cow,” Setsura said, rubbing his shoulders. He wasn’t impressed that she’d been brought down, but that a woman made mad by Mephisto had been knocked out.

“What I’d expect from four thousand years of Chinese technology. This is bound to get Mephisto’s dander up.”

Kikiou’s tube-like body surged toward him, and Setsura danced nimbly backwards. “This old geezer doesn’t want to act his age, picking fights wherever he can find them.”

“Exactly. I have saved Demon City. Doctor Mephisto surrendered to my might. The only obstruction that remains is *you*. Wither and die in these flames, Setsura.”

A door in Kikiou’s torso popped open. From the same opening

that housed the hypodermic, poked out a metal device shaped like a tuning fork.

"Whoa."

Setsura didn't jerk out of the way. Kikiou fell over on his back, as if a defect had arisen in his legs. A circle large enough to admit a person opened up in the ceiling without a speck of dust. As he tried to get up, a burst of power hit him from the side. With a sound like a timpani drum, he rolled to the edge of the flames.

"Killing you is *my* job," said Yakou, rubbing the back of his neck and wincing. "Take the girl and get out. I'll take care of Kikiou for now."

"Hey, thanks." *Yeah, that's gotta smart*, he didn't bother saying. Setsura hoisted Takako onto his shoulders. He'd either forgotten about riding to Yakou's rescue or it was all the same to him. "See you."

He stepped lightly out of the room.

Chapter Three

Well, shit, there's certainly no profit in this,
there's certainly no profit in this.
I'm the dumbest old broad in the world,
the dumbest old broad in the world.

The hearty voice flowed through the darkness. So did the retching stench. And the sound of a pole stirring the water.

The place resembled a laboratory. The walls were lined with books. Old beakers and test tubes and stone pots crowded the top of a stout wooden desk. Books with cracked leather bindings, a drafting triangle and a Parker fountain pen, the dried head of a lizard, and a desiccated cat's paw.

It all seemed to belong here.

To the left of the desk, in the center of the room, burned a coke fire. The hearth was a ten by ten foot space blocked off with bricks and covered with stones. The glowing black lumps were heating the bottom of a big earthenware pot sitting on another two courses of bricks.

All the more surprising was the person standing in the center of the big pot: a fat woman, eyes tightly closed, her dress stained up to her chest, merrily stirring the green swirls with a huge wooden spoon.

It'd be hard not to imagine the fat lady was making her own self part of the stew. Except that here, the imagination of any normal person simply wouldn't do. This was a room in the house of Galeen Nuvenberg.

My big sister, all in bits and pieces,

and only her dear head returned.

So here I stir in my witch's brew

and will serve up its dregs in hell.

Her sad voice notwithstanding, considering the fate of her sister, Galeen Nuvenberg, it was a strange song indeed. Not to mention that, as she stirred the sticky, thick broth, as if mixed with mashed yams, faces bobbed to the surface—perhaps even the head of Galeen Nuvenberg.

Tonbeau took hold of it by the soup-soaked hair and raised it high over her own head, her thick tongue lapping at the drippings and swishing it around in her mouth.

"Ah, just right."

A faint light, like that cast off by luminescent fishes at the bottom of the ocean, shone into the room. The doll girl came through the back door. Observing the head of her mistress she said, drawing her fine brows, "Your bad taste on display, I see."

"Without a doubt," Tonbeau snorted, returning the ominous thing to the pot. "Excuse *me* for my bad taste. So how about this?"

She again raised her hand. This time the broth streamed from the head of the doll girl. “Dumplings made with minced snapper, and I didn’t go light on the garlic or the fennel. You eat it starting with the tip of the nose. Wanna try one?”

“I’m afraid my stomach is feeling a tad unsettled today.”

“Huh. Nothing in this bummer of a burg suits my appetite. Here I went to all the trouble of making my famous Prague seafood stew, Tonbeau-style, and you have the nerve to turn up your little nose at me. I won’t forget this.”

“I am sure our guest would appreciate being treated to such a banquet.”

“Guest?”

“Yes. He’s coming to get an appraisal of a certain item. From our conversation on the phone, he did seem on the peckish side.”

“Can a doll even understand that much?” said Tonbeau, honestly surprised. “When it comes to anything my big sister made, I shouldn’t be surprised. I’ve fashioned a few midget gremlins of my own to wait and serve, but nothing that comes within shouting distance of her accomplishments. Where is this guest?”

“He should be arriving at Takada no Baba station.”

“Huh.” Tonbeau dipped her finger into the broth dripping off the doll girl’s head and put it to her mouth. “A little salty. Well, you’d better hustle off to the station.”

“Yes.”

“You’re being awfully obedient.” She narrowed her beady eyes. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing at all. Tonbeau-sama is deporting herself quite admirably, as a practitioner of the magical arts and as a person—”

“Oh, stop.” Tonbeau put down the big spoon and scratched herself all over with her worm-like fingers. “Ah, a little epidermis into the mix. Saying things like that makes me itch.”

“It is true.” The doll girl gazed fondly upon the fat lady’s unladylike behavior. “This morning, I was thoroughly delighted when you came back to the police station.”

Tonbeau looked like a mathematician who’d been caught making a mistake at addition. Five minutes before the nuclear missile strike, the supposedly decamped Tonbeau had suddenly shown up in the special detainment lockup in the basement of the Shinjuku Police Station, where the doll girl was still agonizing over how to put an end to Ryuuki’s life.

She still hadn’t come up with a way to put his mind at ease. It was now three o’clock and no missiles had landed. But then, seeing her mistress’s fat little sister brought new life to her eyes.

“Oh my, oh my. Praise from others is worse than upwind from a pigsty for a witch like me. Look at this rash! Lucifer, that Prince of Darkness, gave me this curse. Get going.”

“I understand.”

The doll girl bowed elegantly and politely, grinning to herself only when she turned around.

Leaving the house, she looked up at the picture-perfect blue sky. No matter how evil the heart, nowhere to be seen was any sign of those lurking nightmares, fiery wings of death. She hadn't yet gotten hold of any of the particulars, but the abort codes had been relayed to the American Secretary of Defense by the young man dressed in black—who said he was Prime Minister Kongodai.

Whoever it was, this savior had single-handedly given Shinjuku another lease on life. Whatever terrors might still exist, for as long as the sun shone this day, there was no reason not to celebrate with honest joy.

The doll girl turned onto Waseda Boulevard and hurried toward the station. Although the foot traffic was lighter than usual, all the shops were open and the sidewalks were full of people. The tourists and sightseers had sensed nothing amiss.

One in ten, though, hugged the shadowed edges of the streets. They wore sunglasses, scarves around their necks, gloves in warm weather, and went to great lengths to protect their skin. Their presence would have been strange anywhere else. The fear of sunlight, what was that called again?

The doll girl took in the soaring building next to the station with a look of admiration. Once upon a time in Demon City Shinjuku, a certain warlock tried to call forth unspeakable evil from the depths of the earth. A young man from outside the ward had come here to destroy him. His name had been forgotten by most, but the place where he faced off against the warlock was known by all.

A fierce battle to the death had unfolded beneath this ground.

The only name that would be passed down from generation to generation was the name of the sword that young man fought with. The name of *Asura*.

Inside she soon identified the person she was told to look for on the telephone—a man standing in front of the Seibu Shinjuku line turnstiles holding a package wrapped in a dark blue *furoshiki* cloth. Despite—or because of—his unkempt appearance, the doll girl had no problem picking him out.

She was making her way toward the man in the threadbare shirt and slacks when from behind him came an ominous cry.

"No fucking way!"

Several men in loud shirts ran toward the man holding the dark blue package. A look of fear came over his face. He started running too. They soon caught up with him and seized him by the arms.

"This bastard thinks he can just waltz out of here?"

Reaching into his pocket, a man in a pinstriped suit planted himself in front of him. "What'dya think was gonna happen? Think you can just kill our guys and keep the prize to yourself? I'm gonna go apeshit on your ass!"

He drew out a chrome magnum pistol. All the passersby dove for cover. With a cracking sound the man's wrist turned at right angles. Stark surprise reached his brain before the pain did. He and his fellow gangbangers looked down disbelieving.

"Please stop. That person is my guest."

Her gleaming golden hair, cherubic face, clear blue eyes—and hands that could crush a man's wrist. The thug wasn't caught off guard for long, not in this city where the abnormal was par for the course.

"Stinkin' brat."

"Yank those pretty eyes out."

They pulled out high-density steel daggers, hundred-round air guns, nitro bars, the incarnation of all that was brutal and atrocious—and all went flying before their lethality could be demonstrated.

Golden hair and purple satin dress danced among the yakuza, as her hands and feet—the sight of which would have otherwise set anyone's heart at ease—broke knees and snapped shins. Dainty wooden shoes stomped on their chests and bellies, driving ribs into lungs and crushing stomachs. Blood burst from their noses and mouths.

She'd knocked the last one out for the count and laid him out on the floor when two cops came racing up with riot shotguns. Seeing the spectacle before them, "Holy shit," one of them said, summing up the sight for both.

And then ascertaining the nature of the "victims," the thin smiles on their faces said, "Good riddance."

But counting up all the bad guys, their eyes narrowed, and the obvious question was, "Who were they fighting anyway?"

"That would be me," came a voice from the height of his thigh.

“Eh?” A wave of golden hair reflected in the cop’s sensor eye.

“You are?” said the cop, crouching down. Glancing around at the yakuza, he said, “You took them out?”

“Yes.”

“By yourself?”

“Yes.”

The cops well knew that just because something was unbelievable didn’t mean it wasn’t true. “Could we get your name and address?”

A murmur ran through the crowd. Few of them had ever observed a police officer acting so courteously before.

“Yes, but—” The doll girl cast her eyes down in distress.

“What?”

“My name—”

“Yes?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Oh.” But the cop didn’t belabor the point. “Then the person who made you?”

The girl pushed out her chest with evident pride. “Galeen Nuvenberg-sama.”

“You mean, the one who lives in Magic Town?” His sensor eye popped open wide. “You don’t say! One of her potions cured my

wife of her heart ailment."

"And the arthritis in my mom's shoulder," broke in his partner, who was talking with headquarters via the combat watch communicator strapped to his wrist. "One of Miss Nuvenberg's girls could certainly pull off something like this. Could you come down to the station and fill us in on the details?"

"Yes, but I need to go home first. There is an urgent matter I need to tend to."

The cop nodded at once. "That'd be fine. Anybody who's on good terms with Miss Nuvenberg is all right by us. Though I would need to accompany you."

"That would be fine."

"Shall we be going?"

"Yes."

As they walked toward Waseda Boulevard, the doll girl glanced back over her shoulder. The man with the dark blue package had disappeared. She'd have to go back to the house to arrange a second meeting.

Part Seven: Tracking the Package

Chapter One

Cursing his fate, the drifter slipped into a love hotel behind the station. He didn't have any cash, but as luck would have it, three days ago he'd found a fifty-thousand yen all-purpose gift card near a pachinko parlor in Okubo. He couldn't get any cash out of it, but the credit was good at the love hotels.

He'd made it from Shinjuku to Takada no Baba thanks to it. Though it might well prove the last good luck of his life.

When he'd first seen what he had in the package, he knew her day had come. That's why he killed those yakuza and got himself into this fix in the first place—and didn't regret it for a minute.

He'd heard of the witch a long time ago, and found her name in the Shinjuku yellow pages under the "odd and miscellaneous occupations" listings. No sooner was he sure he had it made when *this* happened. Though showing up at Nuvenberg's front door wouldn't have been a problem, all the yakuza and cops left him in such a tizzy that the simple and the obvious solutions didn't occur.

The robot receptionist checked the validity of the card and then led him to his room. From the "Date Club Guide" (that came with the room), he made a call. A girl showed up ten minutes later.

She didn't bother to shower first, but stripped down to a bikini top and thong, got down on her hands and knees, and raised her ass into the air. A nympho prostitute.

The drifter sidled up to her and pressed his lips and tongue against her soft flesh. “Ah,” the nympho said, her body quivering. It wasn’t an act. The drifter’s ardor burned all the brighter.

He licked her all over, pausing only to bare his teeth. Somewhere in his heart the dark flames smoldered. He wanted to tear her apart.

“Bite me, bite me,” she moaned, shoving her butt in his face. This wasn’t an act either. “A little nip’s not going to hurt anybody.”

“No shit?”

“You asked for a M-type woman, didn’t you? My brain’s been engineered that way.”

If he’d actually bothered to read the instructions that came with the book, these “enhancements” were spelled out in explicit and illustrated detail—girls into cutting; girl into burning; girls who could only come after getting shocked with electricity; girls who got off on getting bitten. A girl for every fetish.

“Hot damn,” he groaned.

Wiping the drool from his mouth, he attacked the most luscious white meat. The girl’s screams trailed off to ragged pants as she plumbed the depths of her desires.

“More. More. More.” The vagrant’s jaws worked the soft flesh. She shook her blood-smeared buttocks. “*More. More. More*.”

And then she said, as if abruptly coming to her senses, “Huh? What’s that?”

“What?”

“That—what’s that thing?”

Still crouched there doggie style, the girl fixed her eyes on the package sitting on the sofa.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Really? Looks like something’s moving inside it.”

“No way.”

“Way. You got a black market bird or animal in there? Hey, can I see it?”

She reached out without waiting for an answer.

“Stop.”

The vagrant hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her away, just as her fingers tugged at one edge of the *furoshiki*, turning the package a hundred and eighty degrees, and then—

The girl and the vagrant watched dumbfounded as the package flipped back to its original position.

“What the—but I just about pulled it off the couch!”

“It’s nothing, I’m telling you.”

He took a firm hold of her ass, but the girl’s curiosity was apparently as deeply ingrained as her sexual perversions.

“Just a minute,” she said, clambering to her feet.

“Just a *minute*? Stupid bitch.”

Her hugged his arms around her and tore at her bikini top. There

was barely enough fabric there to cover her nipples and it came away easily. He sucked vigorously on her right breast.

"C'mon, show me," she panted and pleaded.

"Forget it."

"Why? I bet it's valuable."

A greedy glow lit up her eyes. The vagrant didn't notice as he spread her legs and buried his face between her thighs.

"Ah—yeah—bite me—bite me there—"

She grabbed his head. A thick stench rose up of sweat and dirt and dander. Suppressing the urge to retch, she was seized by a thought, a thought that grew and blackened in an instant, all rationalized by that smell.

"Man, you stink," she shrieked, on the verge of swooning as he lapped at her most intimate parts.

"No shit." The vagrant lifted his head. His lips glistened with her sweat and wetness. "I haven't fucking bathed in three months."

The girl grabbed hold of his filthy hair. What a dirty, disgusting man. Exactly the kind she liked to kill.

Thirty minutes later, the receptionist robot protesting that she couldn't just barge in like that, a fat woman stole into the room.

"My stars," declared Tonbeau Nuvenberg, planting herself in the doorway.

Behind her, the small golden-haired head peeked around the great

mass and drew her brows in consternation.

A man lay on the bloody floor. His head was turned in their direction. The rest of him wasn't. He was very much dead. The doll girl quickly examined the room and confirmed that the package wasn't there.

She approached the man and looked at his trouser cuff. There she found a single strand of golden hair piercing the fabric. When he was running away from the yakuza, she'd tagged him with it, a kind of tracer. Once back at the house, Tonbeau had easily tracked him to the love hotel with her magic.

They were too late, and the peaceful love hotel had turned into a death trap.

"Getting it on with a working girl without even bothering to take off his clothes," she clucked. "He must have been hot to trot."

Though there seemed a spark of envy in her words as well, and her cheeks might have flushed a bit. A rather frightening sight to add to the scene.

"It's not here," said the doll girl, inspecting the closets. "She must have taken it with her."

"That's for sure. The end of the line?"

"You think so?"

"I can't shake the feeling I got about that package. As long as the connection is still there, I ain't calling it quits."

"Then what should we do next?"

“We still have a few avenues left to explore. Analyze the pages of that guidebook for his fingerprints. That should tell us where she hails from. But the quicker the better is my motto. Let’s ask the man himself.”

“Yes.”

An unbelievable conversation between a thoroughly unbelievable master and servant. Dead men told no lies, and usually didn’t have much to say about anything else either.

Tonbeau squatted next to the drifter’s head. She plucked something from the rattan basket hanging from her shoulder, and forced it in between the blue lips—a gray living thing with arms and legs. The vagrant’s throat swelled up.

“Idiot. Go the left.”

She slapped him with the flat of her hand and the lump turned left, toward the heart. The left side of his chest swelled up.

A loud knock came at the door. “Please open up, ma’am.” Only one person was speaking, but the knocks came in flurries.

“The love hotel staff. What a nuisance.”

Cracking her knuckles, Tonbeau got to her feet. She considered stomping her feet and bellowing like a sumo wrestler, but the fat witch only pointed her finger at the door.

The lock puffed fire. People poured into the room and ran toward them. But didn’t go anywhere. They pumped their arms and legs as if riding a fleet of stationary bicycles. All the power they were pouring

into their horizontal movements was actually being directed vertically into the floor. They were doing nothing more than stamping their feet, except they didn't notice.

"Fools."

Tonbeau folded her arms and stared at them with undisguised contempt, then returned her attention to the dead man. She seemed to have absorbed a good deal of Japanese culture in a short time. Fat but highly adaptable.

When she dropped her voice to a whisper and began to speak, even the doll girl felt a chill down her back and shivered.

"Can you hear me?"

"*Yes*," answered the dead man.

This was definitely the voice of the vagrant, but his lips hadn't moved. That was the way the creature burrowing into his heart worked. It did the talking for him.

"What is your name?" Tonbeau continued.

"*I—forgot—I have had—so many—*"

"What was your business with us?"

"*Something—I wanted you—to see—found it—beneath a building—in Shinjuku—*"

"And what is inside the package?"

"*The—box—?*"

"A box? An ordinary box?"

"*No—a very old—box—very valuable—dragons and snakes and whirlpools—the picture of a tiger—it eats—people—*"

"Hoh."

"*My—partner—brought the yakuza—tried to steal it—but I hit them—with it—and they disappeared—the dragon and snake and tiger—swallowed them—but it is—too much for me—to handle—*"

"So you sought us out. Good boy." Tonbeau nodded gravely. "Leave the rest to us. We'll send you off to a better place. No need to linger here harboring regrets. By the way, did that rent-a-tart kill you?"

"*Yes—*"

"Who does she work for?"

"*Place called Trendy Miss—name is Yuriko—*"

Tonbeau glanced at the Guide Book. "I've got it memorized," the doll girl said.

"Good. Well, good night to you."

Her caterpillar-like fingers struck his heart like a bongo drum. The swelling shifted. "Idiot," she said with an exasperated huff, observing the squirming lump wriggling down the inside of the man's pant leg. "Damned thing came out his ass."

Takako had "awakened" four hours after that. Though in this world of an eternal noon, a person's internal clock was the only timepiece that mattered.

As soon as she'd been put to bed under Yakou's watchful eyes,

Setsura lashed into Mephisto. “What the hell kind of treatment would put her in that state?”

“That required to achieve the necessary results,” Mephisto answered coolly. “There has been as yet no example of a vampire returning to human form. In order to accomplish such a goal, the ordinary methods would not suffice. You should understand that much. In which case, the physiology of an ordinary *human* should be the last thing you would expect.”

“You’d make a better lawyer.”

“This is the kind of quarrelsome mood I expect from the ordinary *you*.”

“I’m keeping an eye on these *treatments* of yours from now on. No more funny business.”

“Oh, there is no need to play the bad cop here. What can you do in this world? I would ask you to take the time to consider the literal meaning of being surrounded by enemies on all sides.”

“Yeah? We’ll see about that.” He struck a tough-guy pose. “In the meantime, maybe I’ll take the time to stake you and that wily woman. How about we look to Mozart as the inspiration and leave the graves unmarked?”

“That would hardly be the tragedy you imagine it to be.” Mephisto looked down at Takako lying on the bed. “That a creative genius as great as Mozart was buried in an unmarked, common grave without fanfare—this is the misconception of people who know nothing of history or times past. The style of Mozart’s burial was

common among the Viennese middle class. Those attending the funeral would have passed through Stuben Gate, one of the gates in the fortress walls surrounding the city. The horse-drawn hearse and the common trench grave were in accordance with the custom of the day. It was only later that the true greatness of Mozart became apparent to so many. In his own time, he was a master among many other masters. Besides, I need no gravestone. There will be nothing left to mark."

"What do you plan on doing with Kanan-san when she wakes up?"

"Her treatments will continue, though not even I can predict how the situation will evolve."

"When it comes to doctoring, I guess there's old school and then there's just plain *old*," Setsura said with a singsong sourness. Then he lowered his voice and said, "But you *are* going to cure her?"

"I cannot say."

"Plus there's that Yakou business to take care of."

"I am entrusting that to the moon lily. His treatments begin henceforth."

"You're doing this in secret?"

"Everybody knows about the situation with Kanan-san, including Princess and Kikiou. And probably the same goes for Yakou. Rest easy. No one shall interfere with the ministrations of Doctor Mephisto, including Princess."

“I find that hard to believe.”

“As do I.” Mephisto fixed Setsura with a look he hadn’t seen before. “They are oblivious, or knowing, choose not to find out. However normal your *normal* you may be, you cannot be that slow on the draw.”

“Hey, don’t hold back, man. Don’t hold back.”

Mephisto was about to say something when the door opened and three people entered the room.

“They wanted to see what you two were up to,” Princess said with a flippant nod of her head at the two behind her.

“I see,” said Mephisto. “And?”

“Don’t ask me. I have better ways to spend my time. I’ll kill you if you bore me. Otherwise, live and let live.”

Kikiou was the only one who smiled wryly at this open expression of her demonic thoughts. The rest simply looked on impassively, including the one who seemed like he was about to snap his gum and ask if she wanted fries with that.

“Yeah, so what have you decided?” he said.

Princess only smiled. A vein throbbed in Kikiou’s forehead as he intoned in a low voice, “Setsura Aki, you will be housed in the Demon Pavilion and schooled to become one of Princess’s servants. Doctor Mephisto’s laboratory will be moved to the Crystal Pavilion. You will perform all of your research there. However, you will be permitted to leave, and your access to Takako Kanan will not be

obstructed."

A loud clap of the hands. Everybody there turned to Setsura with puzzled expressions. They all suspected he was an odd chap, and here was all the proof they needed.

"Good show, Kikiou! Mephisto, hang in there, guy."

"Under normal circumstances, you and Doctor Mephisto would have been drawn and quartered on the spot."

The great warlock seemed almost in tears. In fact, tears welled up in his eyes and fell to the floor. No one would have been surprised if his tears of loathing had exploded on contact in tiny puffs of flame and smoke.

"Except that a certain someone would certainly intervene, someone I lack the power to oppose. But remember this, Setsura. No matter what world you may find yourself in, accidents will happen."

Setsura rolled his eyes. "C'mon, Kikiou. You're getting stale after four thousand years on the job. Put some attitude into it! Something like: *Watch your back, buddy, 'cause one of these days you're gonna wake up sleeping with the fishes*. That kind of thing."

Princess burst out laughing. "Touché, Kikiou. Now don't you think he'd make such a good underling?"

"Princess, I—" Kikiou started to say, but thought better of it. Making too big a display of his animosity towards Setsura put himself in danger. "I beg your leave, Princess."

"Yakou, Mephisto, you may go as well," Princess commanded.

Yakou’s mouth creased in a frown. His violent thoughts radiated from his being in colors of pure jealousy.

Chapter Two

After the two left, Princess looked down at the unconscious Takako. “So Kikiou injected her with one of his anesthetics? I wonder when she’ll awaken?”

“You don’t know, and *that’s* what concerns you, isn’t it?” Setsura calmly noted. “You really are a revolting woman.”

“You don’t wish to leave her the way she is now, Setsura?”

“Why?”

“As long as this girl is conscious, killing you will be the only thought occupying her mind. The person you are trying the hardest to save is your greatest enemy. Could anything else be so discouraging?”

“Yeah, makes me want to go and kill myself.”

“Sounds to me like sour grapes. Sounds to me like you don’t have an answer.”

“Spend ten days living in that city. When you start sweating the small stuff, all the lives in the world won’t be enough. I do what suits me. What she thinks of that and how she deals with it is not my problem.”

“You will rescue her while evading the hands that reach up to wring your neck. What an amazing man.” Princess smirked. She continued, still beaming, “But that means my reasons for bringing

her here will go unmet. All the more so with Mephisto researching ways to turn her back into a human being. I'd have no use for her then."

Setsura felt a pang of unease. "Hey, isn't Mephisto taking her to his place?"

"Don't even try. I decide everything that happens in this world, including the disposition of this girl."

She suddenly leapt toward the bed as if launching an assault, her features bearing the mien of a demoness. Setsura's skills notwithstanding, his devil wires wouldn't reach in time.

Landing lightly on her feet, Princess said, as if she wasn't even trying, "Ha. You weren't expecting that? Keep this in mind: Kikiou has her in his sights as well. All he lives for these days is keeping you from joining our number, and preserving a pride that towers above anything you possess. Though when you think about it, that is a rather trivial reason for living."

"Without a doubt," Setsura said in honest agreement. "So, how do you intend to turn me into your slave? Or perhaps I should ask when? What's with the weird come-hither business when I can't touch you anyway? Cut you and you heal. Why go to the bother of locking me up when you could come after me any time you got into the mood?"

"What sort of mood would that be?"

"Whatever strikes your fancy." He looked up at the ceiling. "But I can't sit around here twiddling my thumbs. The people of Shinjuku

are turning into vampires as we speak. I'm afraid that calls for the removal of your head."

"Do whatever strikes *your* fancy," the Demon Princess said with a derisive smile. "If you can. I shall answer your previous question. Making you my servant will take a little more time. It'd be so boring to drink your blood and turn you just like that. I'm sure *she* will prove useful in that respect."

"How?"

"Heh. Getting worried? Not quite as cold-hearted as you claim to be? That's why. I will leave her in your care. Call Mephisto, if necessary, and continue her treatments. But here is how it will go, Setsura. Pay attention. From this day forth, every night, I will steal in like a thief and drink her blood. Very little, less than what I have taken so far. But she will proceed inexorably toward her fate. And Doctor Mephisto? The physician cannot heal himself, let alone her, no matter how brilliant he might be. Once is enough. That is the law of heaven. Every night she will seek your blood and become all the more aggressive in her quest. How long can you hold out, Setsura? You must kill me to prevent it, else stop those nightly visits."

As if aroused by the thoughts kindled by her own words, she licked her lips. Setsura's consternation was like an aphrodisiac to her.

"And I am not your only enemy. There is Kikiou, needless to say, and also Yakou."

"I know. That miserable coward and traitor."

“What? In order to destroy the object of his envy, the highest-minded man will become a quisling and a devil. He believes I’m attached to you. It’s tearing him apart with jealousy. If I don’t put a halt to it, he’ll even team up with Kikiou. How do you think you would fare against their combined forces, Setsura?”

“I wouldn’t tell you if I knew,” Setsura said. A stranger would see him grasping at straws. Anyone who knew him even a little bit would have to wonder whether he was bluffing or not.

Princess seemed to place herself with the former. With a belittling smile she said, “Fine. Then everything begins tonight.”

“You were apparently born with the sole purpose of messing with me. But once you’ve turned Kanan-san into a vampire and cast me into that sea of despair, then what?”

“Oh, hardly,” the Demon Princess said with a grave shake of her head. “*Despair* hardly begins to describe the true meaning of the word. If Takako becomes the woman she is meant to be, you will surely raise an even higher standard of revolt against me. And it will amount to nothing. I wish you to surrender to me of your own accord. I will accept nothing less.”

Setsura had nothing to say to that.

“That beautiful face clouded by suffering and sadness and anger, you will kneel before me and say: *Princess, please make me one of your servants*. That is the epitome of my ideal.” She glared at him. “What do you find so funny?”

Setsura couldn’t suppress the smile rising to his lips, nor could

he keep his shoulders from shaking. “You really do have one twisted personality, lady.” He started to laugh. “Why not just kneel and say *Amen!* You’re still living in the Hsia Dynasty or the Shang Dynasty or whatever. Who’s going to kneel to you? Nobody in this world is that gullible. Take a trip outside and ask any office lady and see what happens. Man, you’re clueless.”

“I don’t know who these office ladies are, but that is what I came here for. Everyone in this world will subjugate themselves to me and do what I say. Just watch and see, Setsura. I’ll give you three nights.”

“Hey, whatever yanks your chain.”

“That goes without saying. You’d better get out of the way. The movers are coming.”

As she spoke, a troop of men stood outside the door. The Demon Princess disappeared somewhere else while the men with the pallid skin hoisted up Takako and the bed altogether and escorted Setsura from the manor house to a villa in a green meadow thirty minutes away by foot.

In contrast to the manor house, the villa was white, trim and elegant. The servants, dressed in blue-green uniforms, were assembled like a platoon of soldiers. Soon after being placed in a room decorated to a baroque excess, Takako woke up.

She looked at Setsura, her eyes uncolored by madness. She reached out her hand. Setsura took it. It was very cold. Vampire blood coursed through her veins. When the last touch of remaining warmth died away, so would her breathing.

“Your hand is warm,” she said. She had circles under her eyes like streaks of dust. The sunlight poured undimmed through the window. Setsura brushed his hand against her pale cheeks. “I was once like this too, with life flowing through me.”

She brought the hand to her mouth. Setsura tried to pull back, but couldn’t budge her grip. The back of his hand touched her lips. Setsura looked down impassively as she trailed her lips across his skin in a state more deeply enraptured than love. Then the lips pulled back.

The tips of her fangs dented the epidermis. In another breath, blood would surely pour from the torn flesh.

The moment of peril stretched out. Takako did nothing. Setsura softly slipped his hand from between her rigid fingers. The pain from the devil wire wrapped around her hand had caused her fingers to relax a few fractions of an inch.

“What a bother,” Setsura said, raking his fingers through his hair. “Yes, let’s consider what it means to be surrounded by enemies on all sides. Now and then that quack doctor hits the nail on the head.”

“Release me, Setsura-san,” said Takako, tears welling up in her gentle eyes.

“Sorry,” said Setsura, touching her pale cheek.

“It hurts. A lot. Why do you torture me? Everything hurts so bad.”

“You’re ill. Mephisto is going to cure you.”

“I hate that doctor. He looks at you with such strange eyes. Please, don’t let him touch me.”

“It’s okay,” Setsura said cheerfully. “You’re going to be all right.”

“A bunch of sex maniacs!” Takako’s voice and appearance abruptly shifted. She ground her teeth and struggled against the devil wires. “That pervert doctor and Yakou and even Princess—they’ve all got you in their crosshairs! Get over here where I can reach you!”

“I’m going to have to take—” *a rain check*, he started to say. He glanced up. The candles wavered. “An earthquake?”

The swaying died away. The room grew still. Setsura recalled that something similar had occurred once before—after splitting the Demon Princess vertically in two. He’d felt the earth move, lost consciousness, and had woken up in Shinjuku.

Though that had been more a warp in the air, Setsura’s senses told him that this earthquake shared very similar properties with it. This world was built on a more fragile foundation than previously imagined.

When the shaking stopped, Kikiou drew his brows in

consternation. “Damn. I thought they were out of sight and in a safe place. I’m getting old.”

He got up from the chair and worked the two hands on the workbench back and forth. The joints purred and flexed smoothly. Several small shapes straddling the steel frame fell shrieking onto the table.

“Sorry, sorry. I forgot.” The old man—otherwise suffused with more pride even than Princess—apologized to the strangely small figures.

One was bearing a human-sized pair of pliers, another carried a screwdriver on its shoulders. The other hundred or so must have already returned to their roost in the toolbox.

Knowing that Kikiou’s damaged parts were repaired and installed by these little people might come as a simple surprise, or like the lone alchemist of old, prompt a smile at the sheer wastefulness of the effort.

“I should be able to carry on without any interference here, but it looks like the outside world is no less a magical realm than this one. The madness may arise once again. This driving need to rid ourselves of Setsura is allowing gaps to open in my defenses.”

Grumbling as if to reassure himself, the warlock cast a wary sideways glance. Nobody was there. “That you, Yakou?”

“Exactly,” came the quick reply.

“You come to kill me?”

“Exactly,” he repeated in a matter-of-fact voice. Yakou continued, “Or so I would like to claim. But Princess still thinks you’re worth keeping around. So let’s call this a bit of intimidation.”

“A bit of intimidation?” His lips twisted beneath his white beard in mirth and anger. “The young are indeed frightening. Something truly alarming appears before their eyes and they see and understand nothing. So, what are you here to intimidate me about?”

“Keep your hands off Setsura. He is mine to kill.”

“Then you should have taken care of matters when he first came to our world. How is that working out for you? Not only did he get the drop on you, but clipped your wings to boot. One wonders how you live with the shame.”

“That was too bad.” From the ceiling came the confident sound of flapping wings.

“Doctor Mephisto’s handiwork? The physician treats an enemy as he would a friend. At times like this, such ethics can be a bother. Does Princess know you are here?”

“Don’t worry. I am here of my own volition. Princess has not been whispering in my ear.”

“In that case, she wouldn’t be upset at whatever happens.”

Kikiou’s black hand reached for the edge of the desk. The tip of the pincers struck a particular part. White spheres jutted out from the ceiling and walls. A moment later a colorless, odorless power filled the room, a silent explosion of *qi* that would instantly kill anything it touched.

The black mass dropped from the ceiling. It definitely sported large wings. A black hole was gouged out of the floor where Kikiou had been standing a second before. He jumped clear of it just before the eruption of death.

Looking at the body on the floor, “Even a killer *qi* won’t kill a vampire. Should I stake him before he recuperates?”

Motors hummed as he approached the prone form. Raising a foot, he flipped the body over. He drew his white brows.

“Don’t move,” came a voice from above his head.

Kikiou froze. “A dummy?”

“See for yourself.”

As soon as the pincer touched Yakou’s body, it turned into a paper doll a few inches long. A thought occurred to Kikiou. “An origami ghost. Well, it’s always darkest beneath the lighthouse.”

“The old man knows everything there is to know about Chinese conjuration, but this time I used *qi*.” The force of which could scatter Kikiou’s body to the four winds.

“Go right ahead, but only after explaining how you avoided my killer *qi*.”

“Have you forgotten my lineage?”

“Ah, yes. Before London, you spent four thousand years in China. You would have learned how to defend against a killer *qi*.”

“Your *qi* is not pure, but contains a lot of manmade elements. That makes it all the easier to deflect.”

“And how about Setsura Aki’s devil wires?” Silence. Kikiou didn’t miss that moment of uncertainty. “The wires are threads of titanium. Even I can sever them. But that is not enough to kill him. The hand that wields them must be dealt with. And made all the worse by the ally he now has on his side—namely, Princess’s affection.”

More silence.

“I am but a mere sorcerer. Think of me as an artisan divorced from human sentiment. But an old man like me has no problem comprehending your state of mind right now. What do you think a trained mental health professional would say? The symptoms have all along pointed to a debilitating jealousy.”

In the face of the murderous emotions radiating from the ceiling, Kikiou shrugged, or would have if he had shoulders, but instead ducked his head a few inches into his torso.

“Good heavens. Princess is certainly in a cruel mood. Knowing your feelings and yet flirting with Setsura in front of your face. Oh, please. Don’t get mad at me. You should be directing all those energies at another target.”

“Setsura—Aki—” he said, his voice filled with dark shadows.

“Is that the name? If you can say it, you can say what needs to be done about it. Who is your enemy? Me? Obviously. But compared to him, we oppose each other out of honor and duty. When it comes to him, such true loathing can only come from a rival in love. What do you say? Shall we join forces?”

He asked the question with a purposeful jeer.

“Or you cannot? You cannot oppose Princess? In that case, you will never be anything but a servant for the rest of your life. And for you that means eternity.”

“I will not do anything counter to her wishes.”

“She has her whimsies and her moods,” Kikiou said with unexpected clarity. “She will not countenance being defied and yet she hates the toady. These are qualities not even I can abide. But an exception has now stepped forth. Hoh, a man my age feels the pangs of envy stirring within. Yakou, do you take her at her word?”

“Princess’s word?”

“To make him her servant.”

“So she should, if she so desires.”

Kikiou solemnly intoned, “The servant and the lover are not the same thing, Yakou. You are not loved. But Setsura—whom she regales and torments—he is. That is the way her mind works.”

“So this all comes down to Setsura.”

“It does indeed.” Kikiou nodded. “That is all I have to say. I have told you what I want. If you cannot accept it, then loose your *qi* on me. If you possess any pride as the Elder’s grandson, and pride at all as the second Elder, then bravely beat those wings, and then make your plans and resolve to execute them.”

The great warlock finished his proposal. A long silence followed. And then came the sound of a great bird circling down from the

ceiling.

Chapter Three

Ten minutes after four in the afternoon, a human hippo entered the heavily air-conditioned suite. The occupants looked on in amazement.

“There a girl named Yuriko here?” the hippo wanted to know. “If so, send her out.”

The hippo—no, a fat lady with a bright red scarf around her cheeks—transfixed the “Trendy Miss” date club employees with her overpowering presence. Her eyes glided from the forty-somethings wearing too much makeup to the barely twenty-somethings and finally settled on a girl in the corner stuffing her mouth with shaved ice.

“You there. Come here.”

The rest of them did nothing to slow the steps of the lumbering cow but scattered to either side. Aside from her ample physical presence, she projected an earthy vibe about her that was something quite apart from the norm even here.

Yuriko stood there holding a plastic container and spoon. Tonbeau Nuvenberg grabbed her wrist with her mitt-like hand and dragged her toward the door.

“Just a sec, grandma.”

Stunned like all the rest by this lightning raid, the man handling the phones came to his senses and positioned himself in front of

them.

"What?"

"You just can't burst in here and march right back out again. Who are you? What's your business with this girl?"

"I'm her guidance counselor."

"You?" The man gave her a large frame a long look.

"You got a problem with that?"

"No problem at all. I got a problem with people acting funny. Where do you think you are? Nobody's gonna cut you a break in this city just because you're a woman."

The man's shrill voice took on a threatening tone. On closer look, he sported false eyelashes and rouge-covered cheeks.

"Out of the way, you freaking tranny!" Tonbeau thundered.

"I warned you!" he said, settling into a fighting stance. He probably worked out at a boxing gym. He grunted and threw a right jab into the center of Tonbeau's chest. Then gaped as his fist sunk in between her breasts, like sinking into wet cement.

Tonbeau shook her upper body. Her breasts let go, sending him sailing head-first into the wall.

When the shaking stopped and the room settled down, Yuriko and the fat lady were gone.

Down in the front lobby, Yuriko finally found her voice. "What do you want with me?" She could see no good coming of following

this fatso anywhere. Her own powers of premonition were kicking in.

"You swiped a package in Takada no Baba."

"That's news to me."

That answer was followed by a tap to her abdomen. Excruciating pain shot through her nerves. Her muscles cramped. She couldn't breathe. Her vision dimmed.

"Another one of those could kill you. You want to go to the same place as that vagrant?"

Yuriko spilled the beans. The package was in the apartment near Okubo Station she shared with her boyfriend. It was a five minute walk from the date club suite.

Tonbeau hauled the girl along to make sure. The boyfriend wasn't home. Neither was the package.

"What happened to it?"

Pinned down like a butterfly to a board with a look that could belong to no ordinary fat lady, Yuriko gasped, "San-chan took it. Probably because I said it must be worth something. He knows someone."

"What kind of someone?"

"An information broker. Not a big mover and shaker, but someone who knows everybody. At a time like this, that's probably who he'd try to hook up with."

"Think back. Try and pull any cheap tricks and—" Tonbeau

thumped her on the sternum.

“I don’t know!” Yuriko wailed. But she did know her boyfriend, Sanji Hisakane, would be getting home around seven that night.

The sun was setting when the door opened. Blurry eyes focused on Yuriko, sitting in the middle of the six-tatami mat room.

“San-chan,” Yuriko said in a tearful voice.

“What?”

“Where’s the package?”

“Oh, that,” Sanji said in even tones. “I sold it. For good money. Look—”

Yuriko stared in blank amazement at the bundle of a hundred ten-thousand yen bills he tossed at her feet. That wooden box had transformed into a million yen.

“Wow, San-chan. Like, wow.”

“It’s all yours.”

“What?”

Yuriko raised her head to find her lover’s face right in front of her nose. “It’s all yours. There’s something else I want from you.”

“From me?”

“Your blood.” The fat silhouette emerged from the kitchen nook. Sanji bared his fangs, retreating. She jabbed a finger in his face. “You got turned into a vampire,” Tonbeau said, her words stabbing like a knife.

Compared to the weeping fit when her big sister got killed, here was the cool courage of a completely different person.

“Maybe it happened along the way here, but answer my question and I will send you on to that other world.”

Sanji growled like a wild beast. Fangs peeked out from the corners of his upturned lips.

“Answer me,” Tonbeau ordered him.

Sanji charged at her. No matter how powerful the witch, she was unlikely to conquer a vampire in a competition of raw strength. But in some strange test of the laws of physics, they slammed together like two top-ranked sumo wrestlers colliding head-on.

Muscle and fat banged against each other with a resounding thud. All well and good, but what happened next was even harder to imagine. Sanji tried to straighten himself and pull away. The witch hugged her arms around his back and pressed her lips against his, like a sucker fish against the vampire’s mouth, fangs and all.

A scream gurgled from between the two pairs of lips. It belonged to Sanji. Yuriko watched aghast. Her lover might as well be locked in the embrace of a sex-starved cougar who’d found herself the perfect young gigolo.

Sanji pushed her away and threw his head backwards and clapped his hands to his mouth. Jabbing his fingers down his throat and hacking violently, he coughed up a plume of white smoke and flame. A moment later, the culprit sailed out like a comet.

A peach, the skin still intact.

There was as yet no name for a conjuring trick like that. Tonbeau Nuvenberg had stuffed her cheeks and jammed the demon-crushing fruit into the mouth of this vampire with a kiss.

“All right. Answer me. Where’s the package?”

Tonbeau stood there, hands on her hips.

Yuriko jumped at her. A swat with a hamhock-like fist sent her flying. She fell to the floor next to Sanji. She jumped up at once, waving a bloody paring knife.

“Ow! Ow! Ow! Dammit!”

It was Tonbeau who collapsed, her arms and legs kicking. The room swayed like a sinking ship in a hurricane.

“Run, San-chan!” Yuriko helped her suffering boyfriend to his feet. “I killed that man with this too. And I’ll protect you!”

“No, but how about this?”

“What?”

No sooner had she turned to face him but a white-hot sensation sprang from his writhing body and pierced her neck. Crazed by the thirst for blood or having intended to from the start, Sanji shook his head and bit through her throat down to her spine.

A blood-red mist enveloped them.

Tonbeau was still thrashing about on the floor. Sanji clambered to his feet and started towards her, but another look at that fat corpulent mass and he spun around and raced to the door.

He ran through the corridors and down the stairs to the car park. He was about to head up to the street. His feet seemed to sink into the pavement. Standing at the exit gates was a small shadow. The moonlight glinted off her golden hair. The doll girl.

Above her head fluttered a shadow. Sanji didn't take the time to realize it was a raven. He charged at them. The doll girl's hand reached heavenward. A column of white momentarily connected the raven's mouth and her hand.

The satin dress flashed past the onrushing man and came to a halt. Sanji didn't.

A white stake pierced his chest and jutted from his back. Sanji made it twenty more steps before collapsing on the sidewalk, the impact driving the stake deeper in and the bloody tip further out.

When the doll girl and the raven entered the apartment, they found the whimpering Tonbeau slathering some sort of salve over her right side.

"Dammit, that hurt!" she whined and sniffled.

The bird and the girl exchanged glances. "Are you all right?" the doll girl asked.

"My life has been spared for the moment. Except for the pain! I never should have come to this town in the first place!"

"Is the wound deep?" wondered the raven.

"It doesn't look that way."

"What are you two talking about? It's a serious wound! Serious!"

Tonbeau fumed. “I could have died!”

She struggled to her feet. In the face of her hulking presence, the raven beat a quick retreat to the door.

“What’s with the vampire?”

“He’s dead,” the doll girl said calmly. “What about the package?”

“Eh?” Tonbeau hiked up her brows.

“Eh?” responded the doll girl. “Um, Tonbeau-sama, you said that if he ran, we were to finish him off.”

“What are you talking about? If he ran, you should have figured out that *I* was the one in trouble. Stupid piece of wood.”

“Yeah, and who’s the fatso around here pushing people around telling everybody else to put a sock in it?”

Tonbeau glared at the big raven. A moment later she fell backwards onto the tatami mats in a swoon of pain and chagrin, all their efforts up to this point for naught.

The blade of the paring knife never made it past the first layer of fat.

Setsura opened his eyes. His internal clock said it was night. He was giving his exhausted body a breather. Takako was asleep on the bed next to him. She would soon awake. In this world, a vampire could sleep whenever she felt like it.

Meaning there was plenty of time to plot and scheme and put those plans into motion.

He hadn’t detected any demonic miasmas approaching. These weren’t the types to bare their teeth and come charging in. Knowing that much, he stifled a small yawn.

“Everything’s ready,” he said to the door.

Somebody was waiting beyond it. Whether long or short, a battle to the death, with life and soul in the balance, was about to commence.

Part Eight: A Conspiracy of Conjurers

Chapter One

The hinges creaked, crying out a gloomy scream. A sound perfectly attuned to the scene, Setsura couldn't help thinking. A white shadow stood beyond the open door.

"Europeans know something of propriety," he said, getting up from the chair. "As long as the master of the house doesn't ask you to enter, strangers can't come barging in. It'd be nice to think that a few thousand years in China could have instilled the same."

"Alas, no." The white-caped figure passed easily through the doorway.

"That makes you what?" Setsura said, returning to the chair. "No coffee. Tea's over there. Suit yourself."

"You needn't have gone to so much trouble," Mephisto said indifferently.

He went over to the hotplate where a delicately engraved teacup and teapot were arranged, with settings for two. He put tea leaves into the teapot and set it on the heat. Safe to say that no one in Shinjuku had ever beheld such a sight.

"How about you?"

"No, thanks."

"Don't be unsociable. This is good tea."

"Everything in this world is a sham. What did you come here

for?”

“I came to fetch my patient,” said Mephisto, raising the steaming teacup to his lips. Not only the cup but the tea itself seemed abashed at the intimacy of the gesture.

“That’s okay. Princess ordered her to remain here. You know, she’s the one whose ass you spend so much time kissing. The one who likes to boast how no one dares defy her.”

“No one dictates the disposition of my patients except me.” Mephisto’s eyes fell on Takako. Whenever that gaze rested upon them, viruses and bacteria all said the same thing: *We would happily perish in your presence*.

“Then take her with you,” Setsura said, directing his attention to the door. “But you make the mess, you clean up after it.”

“And what will you do?”

“Do about what?”

“Princess will soon arrive. Do you plan to remain here alone together?”

“What else can I do? It’s high noon for me.”

“You are never going to win with an attitude like that.”

“I’ll just have to give it my best shot,” Setsura said in a singsong voice. He looked at Mephisto. “Listen, if you’re just gonna bust my chops, take a hike.”

“You are in a very delicate position.” Still holding the teacup, Mephisto walked over to Takako. She was sleeping, dreaming

crimson dreams. “They’re all after you, including Princess. And yet she is the one watching your back. You intend to dispose of her, but that is no doubt proving very difficult. So all you can do is wait. You can’t run—what else can you do? I cannot think of a worse predicament.”

“I appreciate your splendid analysis of the situation. Now get lost,” Setsura said with an unusual degree of menace. Princess’s impending arrival was wearing on him.

Mephisto instead sat down in the chair.

“You plan on sticking around then?”

“This is something I very much would like to see.”

“You mean the two of us coming to blows? When did you turn into a middle-aged pro wrestling fan?”

“You are not the only one in the ring.”

Setsura closed his mouth. A shadow flitted across his calm countenance. “This some sort of tag-team thing? When are you jumping in?”

Mephisto didn’t answer. He turned his face toward the door. “She’s coming.”

“Whoa.”

Setsura rose out of his chair. Behind him came a hard thump. The bed shook. Takako had awakened.

“She’s coming,” Takako said. “Release me! Someone’s coming. Release me!”

Someone was definitely coming. Setsura's ears picked up the graceful, rhythmic steps coming straight from the foyer and down the hall. Someone stained with the blood of countless emperors and tyrants. Everyone who heard it felt a shiver and a tingle down the spine, picturing her transcendent features, like finely-worked glass.

What would Takako do now that she was awake? She unleashed a strangled little scream. Or more like the howl of a dog.

Red stained the bed, the result of her violent resistance, the restraining devil wires biting into her skin. The other two were not attending to the mist of blood covering the bed. They were waiting, waiting for the person whose footsteps stopped outside the door, waiting for that third transfixing portrait to join them.

The door violently flung open and rang loudly against the jamb. Setsura didn't hear it. Another sound shook the firmament. A hurricane-strength gale blew through the room, laying flat Setsura's hair and spreading Mephisto's cape out behind him like a bat out of hell.

And then ceased all at once. Like a bad practical joke. There was nobody outside the door or inside.

Setsura turned around. Princess was standing next to the bed.

With a bright *ping!* a thin line of light sliced through her neck. Princess smiled, showing her white teeth. "I have come as promised to drink my nightly fill. Mephisto, what are you doing here?"

"I am checking on my patient's condition."

"You are supposed to be in the Crystal Pavilion. Get back there."

“Later. I haven’t completed the examination. You may wish to assist.”

“What?”

“How goes your recuperation, Kanan-san?” Mephisto asked Takako.

Had Yakou been there, he would be diving for cover. The same question had pulled the trigger on her explosive insanity several hours before.

With a spattering of blood, with the sound of severing bone, Takako sprang to her feet. She did not break the devil wires. The devil wires gouged round slices into her skin, the red rings girdling her from her throat down to her ankles. Her garments tore off and fell away in tubes of fabric that piled atop each other.

“Wait—”

Faster than Setsura could stop her, Takako flew at the Demon Princess—at this supreme dictator, this queen of all vampires. A moment before Takako’s hand closed around her throat, her body spun like a top. Setsura had reached out and pulled her back with his invisible threads.

“Well, that was unfortunate,” he said.

Takako’s defiance seemed in actual anticipation of Princess’s arrival, the initiation of her announced nightly taking of blood. Setsura’s manner suggested he had seen this coming.

Princess didn’t move. Since she’d mounted the stage, who in four

thousand years had beheld such an expression on her face? She was *stunned*. She was *taken aback*. The woman once known as "Daji" gasped.

"She defied me. My servant—me—Mephisto, what did you do?"

"I treated her."

"Obviously," Setsura said, impressed.

The room fell into silence. *Something* else filled that space, like a tidal wave from a distant shore.

"Very good." The roar accompanying the raging waves was unusually soft. "Very good, Takako. Mephisto. You have made a fool of me. And it will cost you dearly."

Setsura looked at the white doctor with an expression that said: *Hey, don't say I didn't warn you*.

"Takako," said the Demon Princess, softly and sweetly. Those legendary emperors had surely heard that same voice. "Kill Setsura."

Takako squirmed in Setsura arms, her arms reaching for his neck. Princess's command of her will had not been entirely extinguished.

"Kanan-san," called out Doctor Mephisto. "Demonstrate for me how far you have progressed."

The arms reaching toward Setsura fell back to her sides. Confused, Takako looked down at her own limbs. She grabbed at her hair with a wordless cry.

Mephisto said he could point to no example of a vampire returning to human form. Proof of that impossibility was those who

had gone mad in the attempt.

"Stand back," Mephisto said to Setsura.

Takako slumped to the floor.

"Kill," Princess ordered.

As if she had pushed a button, an abrupt change came over Takako. She placed her hands on her temples and pushed up, as if to lift her head clean off her shoulders. A sliding sound followed.

"Huh?" said Setsura.

Takako's head didn't come off. Rather, her head rose, as if she was standing up. And yet she was still squatting in the same position. She had pulled *another* "Takako" out of the first.

There was such a thing as the physical separation of the body and the soul. Such a thing as a doppelganger. In one case, the soul temporarily fled the body. In the other, a separate *you* existed independently.

What had grown out of Takako's body seemed a combination of the two. Her now standing form faintly glimmered like a lightning bug. Every strand of her hair was distinct, while the bed and the window were visible *through* her.

"Hoh. What else should I have expected from Doctor Mephisto? What an interesting course of treatment you have adopted." Princess furrowed her beautiful brows with deep intrigue. "This is no mere alter ego. How much power does she possess? You, come here."

Before the command left her mouth, the shining woman turned to

her, then turned away with a disinterested expression. Now she faced Setsura. Pure desire spilled from her eyes, gleaming like knives. Light sparked off her tongue as she licked her lips.

"Hey, Mephisto," Setsura called out, a bit unnerved. "Is this Kanan-san too?"

"So it seems. The essence of her self. The Kanan-san you know is on the bed."

"What kind of treatment did you give her?"

"The very best."

"Really?"

Glimmering blue arms around Setsura's neck. They felt like cotton, a kind of ectoplasm. Even so, they seemed infused with spirit. Lust and naked desire distilled in the fangs jutting from her lips.

Devil wires wrapped around her wrists. She quickly slipped out of them. Darker ribbons of light played across her shining skin and disappeared. She'd brought her face to the right side of his neck when it twisted with pain.

An arm grew out of her left breast, the pale hand shaped into a spear, vivid and alive. Princess's arm pierced the semi-transparent body and raised up slowly. Her limbs spasmed and shook madly. She could feel pain in this state, else Princess could touch parts of her that no one else could.

"What do you think you're doing to this man?" asked the Demon

Princess calmly. “I do not care if you kill him. But lay your lips on him? I will obliterate you on the spot, you fucking mannequin!”

With a flick of her slender hand, Princess threw her against the wall fifteen feet behind her. Without the slightest sound of an actual impact.

“Take a good look, Setsura,” she said, holding her hand up to his languid face. Between her fingers something throbbed with light. “Her *heart*. I will crush the life out of it. Remember well the fate of all those who defy me.”

She curled her fingers into a fist. The girl on the floor pressed her hands against her chest. Rays of light poured out from Princess's clenched hand, the same light that had painted luminescent watercolors across the woman's body.

Princess opened her hand. Something that looked like a heart fell to the floor and rolled over to where she lay. Setsura watched as she picked it up with glowing fingers and thrust it into her chest.

She stood up as if nothing had happened and smiled at Setsura.

"Stay right there!" Princess cried out.

In a whirlwind of light, the woman rushed out the door.

Chapter Two

Mephisto reacted first, before Princess. The white cape fluttered as if caught in a dust devil and disappeared, taking the beauty of the display with him.

He returned several seconds later. “Well?” said the Demon Princess.

“She has fled.”

“That isn’t possible,” Princess objected. “My soldiers of darkness surround the Demon Pavilion.”

“You mean these?”

Mephisto opened his hand, revealing three wooden dolls dressed in old-style military uniforms, only two or so inches tall. The head of each was no longer attached to the body. He said dispassionately, “Another twelve are left out there. Kanan-san is stronger than I would have expected.”

“How much stronger than expected?” Setsura asked.

“All I can say is this: left alone, her paranormal powers will only grow.”

“You don’t say,” Setsura said, flashing an intrigued look at Princess. “You mean, more powerful than *her*?”

“Idiot!” Princess spat out. She normally would have merely smiled at the mention of such an outrageous thought.

“Having no real grasp of Princess’s powers, I cannot say. However, on her present trajectory, she could well become this world’s greatest menace.”

“This world?”

“She was imbued by Princess with a character that is the very incarnation of the vampire. In light of her current form, her next course of action should be clear. Namely, to rip out the throats of all living things and consume their blood. The world shall become the realm of the dead to satisfy her base desires.”

“Don’t worry. I shall find her presently and annihilate her.”

“She has powers equal to those of Princess. She won’t be found. And if she is, whoever finds her won’t come back alive.”

A long moment passed. Princess looked down at Takako slumped on the floor. “And if severed from her foundation?”

“A perfect partition having been achieved, it would be pointless. They should be treated as two distinct life forms, even should the one be a facsimile of the other.”

“But leave her be and she destroys this world. Huh.” Setsura folded his arms across his chest. Somewhere in his untroubled eyes was a touch of glee.

“This could be considered a godsend,” Mephisto said. Setsura nodded and Mephisto added, “But no. Such a perfect separation makes this into a worst-case scenario for you. Kanan-san will always exist as the coexistence of two distinct people. Having lost one, the other there will become a husk of her former self.”

“Then what do you propose?”

“We must somehow unite her with her physical self.”

“And we end up right back where we started.”

“Not necessarily. There are cases of divided selves coming back together in a different fashion than they were before.”

“Different in a good way?”

“There is no way to tell,” Mephisto answered tersely.

“So you’re saying there will never be a good time for destroying her.” Princess chuckled to herself.

“No disagreement there,” Setsura said. “In any case, treat her with kid gloves.”

“Very well. I will don kid gloves before destroying her.”

“I figured you’d say that. Like I said, a nasty piece of work.” Setsura glared at Mephisto. “Quack.”

“Then it is decided, Setsura,” Princess said triumphantly. “I will destroy Takako’s alter-ego. Or you will save it and return it to her original self. Hoh! How will you keep her from me while persuading her to do so? I do love to see you in anguish.”

“Huh,” Setsura grunted, as if in agreement. *So that’s what it comes down to*, he seemed to be saying. It’d be hard to imagine any other man so nonchalant in the face of such a quandary.

In a soft and coaxing voice, Princess said, “How about it? Kneel at my feet and plead for salvation. Ask for my help in saving poor

Takako Kanan. Give me a little *hip-hip-hooray* and I'll listen to anything you have to say."

"Pass," Setsura said, turning away.

"If you intend to chase her down, you'd better get going." Mephisto stepped to the side, clearing a pathway to the door.

As he went by them, Princess said, "Fascinating, Doctor Mephisto. I can't say I'm not grateful."

Setsura Aki said, "I'll remember this, you quack."

"Good luck to you both," Mephisto said to the two figures exiting the room. "Don't worry about Kanan-san here." The cause of the current trouble picked Takako up off the floor and gently laid her on the bed. "Your treatments are not yet over. For the time being, shall we tend to another while other things work themselves out?"

Her treatments—whatever treatments those might be—treatments that ironically depended on the restoration of Takako Kanan's alter-ego, replete with its madness and its steadily strengthening of powers sufficient to devastate this world.

To that end Setsura must suffer, and Princess rejoice. And Mephisto? Did he not find some small reason to rejoice in all of this?

But on to preparing the mysterious compounds for his next patient.

Officer Minagawa was ordered down to the special detention lockup in the first basement level. He grumbled aloud that he'd

already pulled a regular shift. That changed nobody's mind.

There were three others besides him. Minagawa was on edge. Along with the four already, that meant twice as many guards as usual.

When he asked the other three, they said they'd booked an unusual suspect into jail the night before. The scuttlebutt around the station identified him as a "person of interest" related to the recent outbreak of vampire transformations in Shinjuku, perhaps even the ringleader himself.

The kind of thing that sent a cold chill down his back. When Minagawa asked how they'd come to arrest him, nobody knew, only that he'd been surrounded and gave up of his own accord.

Minagawa reflexively raised a hand to the nape of his neck. "Yeah, you too?" his partner laughed. "Did it to me as well."

Everybody knew the defensive protocols. *Hit 'em with a peach before coming down here*. Some bioengineered type, though they tasted just the same.

Even more surprising, the duty sergeant said the eight of them were there to watch a single cell. They hadn't deployed that heavy a guard even when they'd picked up a madman who'd infused his muscles and bones with TNT and literally turned himself into a human bomb.

They were decked out in full combat gear to boot. The cell itself was hardened enough to withstand a small nuclear device. Nothing else could house the kind of criminal element found in Demon City.

Peering into the cell with the monitor mounted on his shoulder pad revealed a one-armed man in Chinese dress lying on the cot. Based on appearances alone, he'd seen a thousand others in his life that looked a hundred times as dangerous. Though in this city, outward appearances said nothing about what was hiding beneath the skin.

At five in the afternoon, it was still bright outside. That's when it began.

The man lying in the cell began to groan in agony. This wasn't ordinary human anguish. If this was the result of a bad dream, then he should go mad every night.

Suddenly in front of Minagawa's eyes, he saw the wastelands. The gray endless expanses, punctuated in the distance by flashes of what must be lightning. The ceaselessly howling wind was like music compared to the man's moans, though the bleakness carried on those shrieking gales made him want to stop his ears and close out every sound.

There was no way he could remain here, Minagawa vowed. A single night and he would lose his mind.

The scene shifted.

Minagawa wasn't alone. Men wrapped in many colors were crossing the plains, some on horseback, others on foot. They were wounded, smeared with blood. Arrows jutted out of their armor.

Beneath their feet, bones mingled with the sand and dust. No, upon closer inspection, the entire plain was made up of white bones.

Layer upon layer of countless skulls, sand filling the gaps, forming hills and fields. Those who trudged across it were cursed to the last man.

Minagawa understood that this was the path he had trodden to get here. So of course he would writhe and wail in the face of such nightmares.

“He’s coming!” someone called out.

“To the door! He’s gonna try and get out!”

“Don’t be a fool. He couldn’t bust out of there with a nuclear bomb!”

The heavy reverberations brought Minagawa back to his senses.

“The door’s caving in!”

“No fucking way!”

Alarm bells sounded. Three foot solid steel doors bowed out from the walls. The hinges creaked and shattered one after the other.

“The peaches!” Minagawa shouted. He got out the pale fruit. They’d all heard they could ward off evil. These peaches weren’t about to end up in their stomachs. With an earthshaking rumble, the door fell outward.

“Run! Get out of here!” he yelled, even as his finger was pulling the trigger on the electromagnetic cannon strapped to his waist.

Fifty-thousand volts charged the fifteen-hundred round magazine. A curtain of steel rounds swept sideways at his colleagues. Ballistic polymer helmets were so much Swiss cheese under the assault.

Looking down at his writhing partners, Minagawa put his hand to his neck and felt the faint pair of dimpled bumps there.

Thirty-five years before, at the age of three, the man that attacked him while he was playing by the river was a vampire. Regardless of nationality, the curse of the vampire was universal, without boundaries.

The dispirited figure emerged from the shattered doorway. Minagawa took a step back and greeted him with a silent bow. *Such an unexpected reunion after so many years*, he thought. The graceful but somehow sad face looked at him. A sharp pain pierced his neck.

Minagawa felt he'd at last laid down the heavy burdens upon his shoulders.

Chapter Three

The man stretched mightily and sat down on the sofa. The long day was finally coming to an end. He still had a ton of things to deal with, but there really were times when some tasks were best put off till tomorrow.

Arriving home after a week away, his wife greeted him with a face like an iceberg. At least she did give him the old "Who the hell are you?" routine. She'd probably turn a cold shoulder to him in bed, and thank God for that too.

His eyes fell on the package on the cushions next to him. He picked it up and put it on the table. He was the kind of man who bought such things from the kind of men who sold such things. In the heat of the deal, there wasn't time to call in an appraiser. He had to trust his gut and his luck.

Containing his rising spirits, he began to undo the knots.

Monsters bared their fangs from the red surface of the worm-eaten wooden box. A dragon flying through the air; a giant snake coiled around a mountain peak; a white tiger prowling the ground—these animal drawings dashed off in black ink possessed an uncanny realism and sense of presence that burned into his retinas so vividly that he unconsciously pulled away.

"He said he dug it up—"

The man stroked his jowls. He couldn't believe his luck. There

was no end to the precious artifacts that only an expert could put a price on. But he could count on the fingers of one hand those ancient works of art whose value *anybody* knew at a glance. This was one of them—in the same class of a nation's crown jewels. No, a wonder of the world.

The shining brightness in the tiger's eyes, the realism in the dragon's scales—he noticed his palms were sweating and wiped them on his bathrobe. The air conditioner was on full. He hadn't been this excited about a find in a decade.

He touched the lid covering the box. Considering its design, those creatures must protect untold treasures within. His finger froze. He had the feeling the tiger was glaring at him. He put more effort into his hands and lifted up the lid without any additional effort.

He let out an explosive breath. Just as the phone on the table rang. Clucking to himself, the man replaced the lid and got up. He stepped over to the desk and picked up the receiver.

"It's from Kanzaki-san," said his wife, sounding like fingernails on a chalkboard. Calls to the residence weren't set to go directly to the study.

"Tell them I'm tired. I just got home."

"He says it's urgent business, from the Chief Cabinet Secretary. Kanzaki-san says it's not something he can handle on his own."

"What the hell's with Demon City's General Administration Division?" he grumbled. "Who does he think the bad guy is here?

My God, if he doesn't have the brass to intimidate the likes of the Cabinet Secretary—well, all right. Fine."

Yoshitake Kajiwara, mayor of Shinjuku ward, took a deep breath and prepared himself to tear his subordinate a new one.

Setsura ran after the Demon Princess, following her to the middle of the forest. The reasons were simple.

"I know where Takako is," she'd said. "Come with me and we'll throw a little reunion."

Normally, whether or not to take a handout from the enemy would be a no-brainer. But the situation was hardly normal this time.

"Sure," he'd said, and went willingly with the woman in white.

They weren't on any kind of trail. The undergrowth changed with every step, up to the knees, to the chest, over his head. Princess alone strode without a detour, without slackening in her pace, running along with a straight bearing. Setsura couldn't help noticing that the thick shrubs and briers parted before them of their own accord.

A white object wavered in the distance. Using his devil wires out as sensors, he determined that it was a towering column of high-temperature steam. Despite the smell of sulfur, there was nothing toxic about it.

After another fifteen yards, a rugged and rocky field appeared in a corner of the forest. The steam rose in thick columns. Between the columns a pool of water, a hot springs, was visible.

Standing next to a rock, Princess put her hands on the clasp of her robe. Setsura said, “You came here to take a bath? You’ve been taking me for a ride.”

Princess paused and smiled. “Nothing of the sort. You will learn of Takako’s location soon enough. But you’re looking a bit down in the mouth. You must be tired. Not a condition at all appropriate in one of my servants. You could use a good soak.”

“You think this is the time for that? I’ll go on without you.”

“Go where?”

“Wherever.”

“Regardless of whether you know where that is. How very much like you. Go wandering around in the dark and you are bound to get lost. You’ll do yourself more harm than good.”

So it was back to the hot springs with this woman.

“Besides, didn’t you wound your hand in the village of the Dancing Fiend? These waters would do you a world of good. Join me.”

The steam or her garments blocked his view. When his vision cleared, she wasn’t there anymore. A splash and spray of water that made him duck.

“What are you doing? Come on,” she urged him firmly, standing in the hot springs, boldly exposing herself above her waist.

Light reflected off the water beading on her porcelain skin like pearls. Princess herself was an angel, her body itself the beautiful

treasure. A small spark of admiration lit up in the eyes of the young man looking idly on.

"Hurry up," Princess enticed. The tone of her voice was the same, but layered now with husky overtones.

Setsura started to walk towards her, and then stopped. She wasn't weaving a spell over him. The only magic she was using was her own nudity.

And yet the sight alone stirred up mists of sexual desire that clouded his thoughts, rang like crystalline bells in his ears. His self-control slipped away. He cast himself into a sleepwalking state as he yielded to her commands.

"What a strange man. Don't you want me? Don't you want to embrace this body at least once? Or do you belong to Doctor Mephisto's tribe?"

Now shadows of disgust and volition flitted across the unruffled features. "Enough with the kidding around," he said sternly.

"Then come on in. I—" Princess looked up at the sky. "Hoh."

Setsura followed her gaze. "Huh," he said.

"What did you see?" Princess asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"Then what did you say *huh* for?"

"Dramatic effect."

Princess gave up trying to twist his moral arm. "There will be

plenty of opportunities for us after this. If you find the prospect so disagreeable, then I will enjoy the waters alone. You take the point. Go looking for Takako alone."

She sank down, down to her head and deeper still, until only her black hair floated on the surface, until it too was sucked into the depths, leaving him very much alone.

He gazed at the sky, the surrounding forest, the bathing hole at his feet. He nodded. "Might as well."

Though he didn't sound convinced that these hot springs were as grand a place as she claimed it to be.

Ryuuki walked alone down Okubo Avenue. The old warrior's refined features were strained with inarticulable distress. Now and then, a passerby turned for a second look.

The root of Ryuuki's pain was his craving for blood. He was starving and suffering. Blood was life. He was exercising his martial spirit to suppress that desire.

Reverberations shook the air above his head. Bright beams of light pierced the darkness and swept towards General Ryuuki. Helicopters.

"You, there! Stop where you are! Don't move! Our laser cannon and missiles are trained on you."

Ryuuki counted how many were hovering around him. Five, positioned randomly across the sky.

He moved fast. Beams of light fell to the ground in front and in

back of him, to the right and left. The asphalt vaporized. Flames shot up, thousands of degrees in intensity.

One beam caught him dead in the chest. He fell forward violently. Another beam pierced his skull.

"Cease fire," came the voice over the radio. "But don't touch him. Hold your positions until the ground troops arrive. Don't let down your guard."

"Roger that."

The helicopter drifted closer, forming an air cordon around him. Ryuuki suddenly looked up at the sky. Laser cannons and RPGs weren't enough. An invisible *something* ruptured the air in the center of the squadron. As if summoned by unseen forces, Shinjuku's elite helicopter corps plummeted a hundred and fifty feet to the earth.

Part Nine: Ryuuki Agonistes

Chapter One

The sirens and lights of the patrol cars converged on Okubo Avenue. The Toyama bus stop.

These lights and the sounds were said to make evil cower everywhere, but the occupants of the vehicles were hardly in a confident mood. They knew that Shinjuku's air combat wing, the much vaunted helicopters corps, had just been destroyed.

They knew who the criminal was too. A single, unarmed man. These air devils, equipped with lasers and air-to-ground missiles and rotary cannons, had been knocked out of the sky with a wave of his hand.

What good would their puny side arms do?

Their blood boiled with anger and revenge. At the same time, a cold thread of fear ran through their guts. Fortunately, all that remained at the scene of the crime were the blue trails of burning aviation fuel, the twisted wreckage of the helicopters and the bodies of the crew members.

There was no sign of the perpetrator.

The reconnaissance helicopter radioed in: "*Toyama Park and the Toyama housing project are being searched. You will be updated of any findings. Over*."

"Start looking further afield," the incident officer announced.

The man turned forty-nine this year, and for all the time he spent grandstanding at crime scenes was generally regarded as a run-of-the-mill desk jockey. But none of them had a problem with that directive.

Several days before, the Toyama housing project had been hit by a mysterious nuclear attack. Not only was the central courtyard cordoned off, but the rest of the block still seethed with radiation.

Thanks to the superhuman efforts of the departments of public health and safety and nuclear control, that same day the surrounding neighborhoods were blocked off with lead-impregnated, high-polymer barriers and sprayed with radiation absorbing foam. Levels immediately outside the project had been reduced to acceptable levels, though the threat of radiation poisoning inside the zone would remain dangerously high for at least another month.

No matter how reckless a remorseless killer monster might be, no way would he hide out in a hell like that. The quarry had plenty of time to escape in the time it took for the recon helicopter and patrol cars to arrive.

Toyama was left in the care of two cars. The rest scattered to Wakamatsu and Kikuicho.

Ryuuki had ensconced himself in that hell. Risks from radiation and cancer were human concerns. This place, right in the center of the Toyama housing project, was entirely suited to his needs.

A nuclear bomb small enough to be carried by a single person still carried a horrifying punch. Closer to ground zero, the trees and buildings had been mowed down, the apartment blocks scorched

through to their empty steel skeletons.

The haunting night scenes glittered eerily in his eyes. The shattered concrete, like piles of discarded pottery damaged in the kiln. The twisted foliage abruptly deprived of oxygen and reduced to charcoal. In their midst, the glimmering foxfire, the glowing radiation.

“They scattered death here and opened the gates to hell. I heard those who lived here once might have been called cousins of mine.”

A hill rose quietly up before him as he strolled along. The highest point in the Toyama housing project, nicknamed “Hakone.” He climbed the stone stairs and sat in silence on the stone bench at its apex.

He took the small koto from his back. The musical instrument was called *Silent Night*. Not ten people in Demon City knew of its magical powers. Here in Shinjuku, Toyama was also a place of destruction.

Ryuuki strummed the strings. For whose ears did the murmuring tune and whispering voice well up?

It is the dead of night and I cannot sleep

so I arise and play my koto

The curtains are aglow with moonlight

a cool breeze brushes my sleeves

In the far corner of the field

a Peng bird calls out, separated from the flock

circling the northern woods, the flock answers

What are you looking for as you wander about?

All you will find is a wounded heart

Echoing across the infinite night sky came the cry of a bird. Only the night listened.

The strings danced. Pearls flew into the sky. Tears of anger and pathos. And then there was no more. Still holding the koto, Ryuuki turned to his left. A small shadow had mounted the stairs. “We meet again,” he said in a sad voice.

She grasped the hem of the satin skirt, curtsied and smiled, as if between father and daughter.

“It is good to see you here unharmed. What became of that woman?”

“You mean the mother of the children whose blood you drank?”

“Yes.”

“You can rest your mind in that respect. Though her wounds were severe, we took her to a hospital. She should live.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

“You tore out the throats of the children and drank their blood. And yet killed them such that they would not become children of the night. I might even say you killed them with compassion and sagacity.”

Her words were affectionate, and yet like a stiletto between the ribs. Ryuuki smiled grimly. “You know me well.”

“She’s got a better pair of eyes in the sky than those helicopters,” came a voice from above.

Nevermore.

“So the bird is doing well too,” Ryuuki said, sounding truly relieved. “Well, what business do you have with me?”

“The impossibility of destroying you became apparent at the police station. So it follows that you must be confined until the only remaining method—destroying she who first took your blood—can be accomplished.”

“I broke out of the cell you had confined me to.”

“We are preparing one just for you. Please come with me, if you do not wish to be responsible for any more victims.”

“If I do, I will no longer venture out into the night?”

“I guarantee it.”

“That is a guarantee I value highly.”

Ryuuki stood. A veil of tranquility covered his intrepid face. His body was suddenly enveloped in a smoky fog, like condensed moonlight. Dust.

“No, Shuuran,” he stated with firm resolution, as the bands of gray twirled around him with affection. “I will go with her. Have me kill no more. After this, I will suffer the pangs of hunger and thirst as best I can.”

Two spots of light appeared in the darkness. Blood red.

“Watch it!” A hoarse voice said above their heads. “His true nature is awakening!”

“If you would, please.”

The doll girl calmly stretched out her left hand. A golden jar rested squarely in the center of her palm. Placing her hand on the lid, the doll girl leapt backwards as Ryuuki approached.

Without slackening his speed, Ryuuki turned to the right and began to descend the stairs.

“Wait,” the doll girl commanded. At the same time, a raw smell roiled into the air, spreading out like a flooding tide.

Ryuuki whirled around in surprise. Why should he run—here was the smell of blood, thick and rich and sweet, hinting of copper and steel, like nothing he had tasted before.

“That—is—” he gasped, his mouth watering.

Could the man he had just been—the beautiful soldier playing a mysterious tune in this little corner of the night—ever be mistaken for this creature? His face contorted. The glowing crimson rays spilled from his eyes like red drool. He finally steeled his chattering teeth.

“Hand it over—” His hand reached out, the fingers trembling.

“After tussling with you, Tonbeau-sama and I created this fake blood. It will taste sweeter to you than that of any human.”

“Yes—give it to me—”

The hungering, half-human thing inched toward her. The doll girl mirrored his steps backing away. “This is the snare to trap you. Considering how hard it is to kill you, putting you to sleep will be much easier. Knowing that, do you still want it?”

The silhouette leapt towards her with an inarticulate growl. The dress and golden hair pranced effortlessly backward. The golden jar remained between them.

As if fearing she might reach in and swipe it at the last second, Ryuuki dashed forward and scooped it up in his arms, casting menacing looks all around him.

A sad expression somehow grazed the doll girl’s sweet face. “You do not look in the mood for a fight to the finish with me. Drink. Once those eyes have closed, you will slumber in the eternal darkness, never again venturing into the outside world.”

Ryuuki raised his head and the jar. He drank like a man crawling out of the desert, the blood spilling out of the corners of his mouth and dripping onto his borrowed shirt and slacks.

His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down, then stopped. His fingers released their iron grip on the jar. It fell with a thud to the black earth. As if taking the jar’s lead, Ryuuki toppled over several seconds later.

The doll girl waited for the disturbed air to still, then walked up to him. She looked down at the jar and the general and *Silent Night* hanging from his head.

“This alone you would not leave behind, and took it back from

the police before coming here. Such marvelous playing. For a second time, I experience the deep regret of having no tears to cry.”

She picked up the jar and tossed it into the sky. No sooner had it vanished from view but there came the flapping of large wings. Then that sound disappeared as well. The jar did not fall back to earth.

The Peng bird returned to the north. What became of the fallen soldier?

With the artificial blood, mixed with the detested essence of the peach, coursing through his veins, the doll girl hoisted Ryuuki onto her slender shoulders and walked quickly to the stone staircase.

The moon hovered high overhead.

Bathed in sunlight, Kikiou entered the room. Seeing him, Mephisto straightened the test tube. It was filled with a medicine of a curious color. Beneath it, the garish liquid collected in a beaker. This was his laboratory in the Demon Pavilion.

“That agrees with you,” Mephisto said.

The old man rubbed the wrist of the hand holding the cane with his free hand. It seemed an affectionate gesture, contemplative even.

“You made that yourself?”

“More or less. I apologize for imposing on the doctor’s good offices.”

“Feel no need to refrain.”

Kikiou turned a pair of curious eyes on Takako, lying on the bed to Mephisto’s left. “That girl, Princess was to bare her throat and take her blood. Is that why she sleeps here?”

“This is the result of Princess’s mistake.”

“What?”

“Kanan-san gave birth to a separate self that Princess and Setsura are now pursuing. She apparently possesses power that could destroy this world if left unhindered.”

“I cannot believe such a thing could occur. Then I must leave at once.”

“Even if you do, you will not find them anytime soon. If this world is truly Princess’s own, then she will surely have her way with it. I would let them be.”

“But—how could that girl’s body have given rise to such a thing?”

“That would be due to me.”

“To you?”

“The result of the experiments both you and Princess have been well aware of. Though it was Princess who drank Kanan-san’s blood, one of them is now attempting to bask in the power unobstructed. Physically reunite them, and not even I could predict which would reign supreme.”

“What have you done, Doctor? Bad enough that you should be searching for ways to release this girl from her servitude to Princess. But to release such a monster on this world?”

“Weren’t you planning on making Shinjuku your own domain?”

“That is exactly what I am saying.” Kikiou glared at Mephisto

with now evident loathing. “Back to the matter at hand. If *she* dies, won’t the other as well?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Then—”

“Then what do you plan on doing with *my* patient?”

Caught in his cool gaze, Kikiou flinched, half from the sheer weight of his beauty. “I have no intention to act counter to your desires. However, there is something I wish to ask of you.”

“Oh?” the white doctor asked with evident eagerness. “What would that be?”

Kikiou licked his lips and formed his resolution into words. “Doctor, to what ends did you become one of us?”

“You know the answer already: to learn the true nature of a world that only the vampire can comprehend.”

“That is the only reason?”

“The evidence before you isn’t enough? No matter what the suspect says, I gather you would not believe me. In short, no one else can understand another’s mind. The human animal is forever a bundle of doubts.”

“Would you mind if I take that to mean you may have other ends in mind?”

“Take it any way you please.”

“Well, then. How goes your treatments of the girl?”

“Not so well,” Mephisto answered without hesitation.

Kikiou blinked at the alacrity of the response. These were words he never expected to hear coming out of *this* doctor’s mouth.

“Not so well?”

“Restoring those whose blood has been taken by a vampire to human status again without destroying the master is more improbable than resurrecting the dead. That I already understood.”

“And doesn’t that second young woman argue against that conclusion?”

“I suppose it could.”

“Doctor—do you really care one way or another what happens to this world and all the rest?”

“Well—”

Two pairs of eyes momentarily met in midair and threw off sparks. Kikiou lowered his gaze. “I will be leaving, then,” he said with a bow.

“I recommend that you not interfere with Princess and Setsura,” Mephisto said. “You have more important things to concern yourself with, I’m sure. Yes, of course. Would you happen to know where those moon lily flowers might be found?”

“Quite a number are blooming in the back garden of the manor house.”

“How about that,” said Mephisto, turning his back to him as Kikiou left the room.

Chapter Two

From the expression on Kikiou's face, he was clearly wracking his brains as he strode silently among the trees. A black shadow dropped down with a soft thud, swinging an large arc around the branch of an oak tree hanging over the path.

"You seem in a contemplative mood, Sir Kikiou." Echoes of sarcasm and laughter accompanied the observation.

Kikiou stopped and looked up at the upside-down Yakou. "This has become a serious matter."

"How terrible. You're not planning on killing Doctor Mephisto?"

"In fact, I am."

The air around them abruptly dropped a dozen degrees. "Are you really serious?" Yakou asked, his voice several shades darker.

"That damned doctor may be beyond our power to deal with. Having been added to Princess's number, he should feel obliged to protect and defend this world. But he has other objectives in mind."

"Then what becomes of this world?"

"I suppose he intends to destroy it."

"Why would he? Mephisto allowed Ryuuki to drink his blood so he could behold mysteries of our world with his own two eyes. I don't think he was lying."

“I thought so as well. Yet he is different. I am beginning to realize that even being one of Princess’s companions, he has an agenda of his own that we can barely begin to grasp.”

“We can’t imagine him wrecking this place?”

“Yes, that, but not only that. *That* is a far too simplistic interpretation.”

“Then what’s a more complicated one?”

“I do not know.” Kikiou shook his head. “I don’t know. That is what makes him such a terrifying opponent. Doctor Mephisto—compared to him, even Princess is a baby.”

“Hmm.”

Sensing something in that murmur, Kikiou shot a penetrating glare at Yakou. “You haven’t been taken in as well, have you?”

“By whom?”

“Besides *him*, who else has been reaching out to you?”

Yakou didn’t answer at once.

“Suppose that his heart’s desire is to destroy Princess and this world, with whom will you side?”

“Princess, of course,” Yakou answered at once.

“Good. And neither would Princess forgive a lie.”

“But that doesn’t necessarily mean I’m going along with what you are saying,” Yakou added with a deep note of caution. “Not as long as we have no evidence of Mephisto’s plans concerning the

destruction of this world, nor any sense of his true motives."

"You have no need to worry. We will soon get to the bottom of it. Come with me."

Shrouded in sunlight, they returned to the manor house. Kikiou's laboratory was provisioned much the same as Mephisto's. After rattling through the shelves in the back of the room, Kikiou placed a narrow bamboo tube in front of Yakou.

He said to the doubtful scion, "This is *talking water*. One drop alone and that person will answer any question posed by the interrogator. Normally it would be placed in food or drink, but have you seen that man put anything into his mouth since coming here?"

"No," said Yakou.

He was a bit surprised by his own answer. That doctor in white, to be sure, was no ordinary human being. That he ate *nothing* was the kind of indicator that shifted the equation in far different directions. Yakou couldn't help shaking his head in wry disbelief at his attempts to apply human assumptions to the man's existence.

"Exactly," Kikiou said emphatically. "We could insist, but that would too easily tip our hand. Once he said no, we would be left without recourses. You, however, have ways of your own."

Yakou's mouth tightened, but he said nothing.

"If you truly care about Princess's welfare, the thing should be set in motion at once."

"I'd like to see for myself first, to make sure you are telling the

truth.”

“What are you suggesting?”

Yakou uncorked the tube and spilled some of the contents onto his palm. He dipped his forefinger into the thick golden liquid and then swiped it across Kikiou’s lips.

“Do you love Princess?” Yakou asked.

“Of course,” Kikiou answered, as his eyes clouded over.

“After everything else is taken care of, what do you intend to do with me?”

“Kill you, if you please.”

“I see,” said Yakou, a certain scene rising before his mind’s eye. “So it’s the real thing.” A slight but definitely licentious look crossed his face.

The hot springs was tempting. Though it wasn’t particularly to Setsura’s liking, breathing in the plumes of sulfurous steam keenly reminded him of his bedraggled state.

Princess hadn’t emerged since submerging herself. Gazing up at the sky, she must have sensed something, ascertained Takako’s location or the like. He glanced around through the rising plumes at the rocky area surrounding the hot springs, closed his eyes and nodded to himself.

“All right then.”

Leaving only his black outfit behind on the rocks, the lithe and handsome figure slipped into the hot water. The sensation in his gut

—like he'd gulped down a lump of cold lead—made him draw a deep breath. The remnants of Ryuuki's penetrator *qi*.

Perhaps Princess had figured it out already, but running across the ground, swinging through the air, that unceasing cold stitch in his side sapped his strength in a flash.

"Man, oh man," Setsura softly said.

He put his hand on his stomach. A dull throb radiated through his body from his finger—the wound from the mask maker's village. He had no trouble wielding his devil wires with it—or so he'd like to claim. But he couldn't deny that slight differences had presented themselves.

A leaf floated in the water a dozen feet or so away. A streak of light flashed through the air. The leaf chirped. Nothing else changed.

Setsura lowered his head and puffed a small breath against the water's surface. When the small waves touched the edge of the leaf, the little green boat severed neatly in two.

"Damn." He closed his eyes and lowered his chin to the water's surface.

"Miss?" Princess asked behind him.

"Yes," Setsura said, without any evident concern.

"You knew I was here? I shouldn't be surprised."

"The same goes for you. You should have known that I knew. You didn't notice the thread attached to my clothing?"

Princess smiled in a humoring manner. "And knowing that I

knew, you decided to take a bath anyway—after protesting so much earlier. You are a mystery to me as well."

"Huh," Setsura sniffed, as if to say, *a woman understands me?* Then: "Keep your distance."

"Hoh. Am I that frightening?" she said with a seductive smile.

"No, but keep your distance."

"I would think that sharing a hot bath with a woman is something no man would find disagreeable. Any man who sees me in a hot springs is liable to jump in and join me with his clothes on."

"The kind of thing that little boys dream of," Setsura said, retreating as Princess swam closer.

Princess swam around him in a leisurely manner, a shark circling a small fish. Beneath the rippling surface of the water, her white arms and breasts took on an especially bewitching quality. Each stroke of her arms revealed a peek of her fair skin, at once renewed and all the more beautiful.

Her black hair touched Setsura's arm. "Whoa," he said.

"Hey!" She scooped up the hot water with her hands, raising a sudden shower as the wave splashed off Setsura's face. "Do you think playing dumb would keep me from figuring out you're fighting at half strength? Enough with the tough guy routine. Why do you keep fleeing from me?"

"Because you're a vampire," Setsura said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“What’s wrong with that? I am more beautiful than any woman who doesn’t drink blood. And can make a man happier than any of them. Those who have tasted of my pleasures but once present their scrawny necks to me without complaint. A beautiful throat like yours never once came before my eyes.”

“Sounds like you have a fetish for windpipes,” Setsura said, scratching the back of his neck.

The Demon Princess looked into his eyes and asked in a subdued voice, “If I wasn’t the kind of girl who’d drink a man’s blood, would you take me to your bed?”

“Sure.”

The straightforward nature of the answer made Princess purse her lips. “I have destroyed kings and emperors, and you would prefer the company of some stinking mortal woman over me? What manner of man are you, Setsura?”

“I am a citizen of Demon City. The owner of a *senbei* shop who moonlights as a private detective. Would you like me to tell you something I’m sure you will find perfectly delightful?”

“What?”

“I was hired by a man to do a job, the man General Ryuuki caused to fall asleep at a most inopportune time and whose pride was most grievously wounded. He commissioned me to find you. But he happily joined forces with you, your freeloading house guest.”

“And why don’t you become one as well?” Princess asked,

turning slowly around him. “Demon City Shinjuku will become the kingdom of my servants in any case. As long as I don’t destroy it first. Either is fine with me. You and I can always find someplace else to settle down.”

“Such as?” he said with evident curiosity.

“Any place you please. A whole new nation, a whole new world.”

“And make more companions for yourself?”

“The thought never occurred to me. Once I have satisfied my hunger, I leave it to others what becomes of them.”

“Keep at it and there won’t be any others left. What an irresponsible woman you are.”

“All I am looking for is freedom. If the world starts to disappear, I’ll take a nap for a while, and perchance dream wonderful dreams. And if by chance the world ends up dwindling to dust, well, let’s cross that bridge when we get to it. Strolling through the destruction and across the wastelands should provide plenty of its own amusements.”

“So no matter what happens, you always look for the entertainment value.” Setsura sighed. Perhaps because of the hot water, his face was a bit ruddy, the color of cherry blossoms.

“Jealous?” Princess asked enticingly. “Then come with me.”

“Are you going to keep on bugging me with all this changing horses in the middle of the stream? What becomes of your standing as a princess?”

“I take nothing into consideration but my freedom. What, you disapprove?”

“I suppose that also means I’m free to answer however I please. But yes.”

The Demon Princess gazed back at him strangely and didn’t answer. Setsura looked down.

“It’s getting cold.”

Though the billowing steam continued to reach into the sky like twining serpents, the water around Setsura was definitely losing its heat.

“Do you remember what happened to that cranky old witch? Draw and quarter her and she dies. But not you. Shall I have you taste the suffering of having the flesh rent, the bones broken, and never dying? You who spurns my proposals?”

Not said in anger, nor with any eerie air, but like a different person. A feeling beyond the human—that should never be held by one human against another—coiled around Setsura.

His head slumped, as if in fear. He looked at the water, as if entranced by his reflection there, this beautiful genie. A still, small voice froze Princess down to her bones.

“You said you drew and quartered her?” Setsura said, his head still bowed.

The expression on Princess’s face changed all at once. The water grew all the colder. The steam cast off a winter wind.

“We have met before,” she almost hummed. “I thought there might be someone lurking inside you. But that is *you* as well.”

“You said you drew and quartered her?” Setsura repeated, answering her song with one of his own. “Before that, you became two as well. With *my* threads. You brought those memories to the surface, woman. The manner of Galeen Nuvenberg’s death.”

His raised his face, his beautiful face. The face of an evil angel at the moment of death. Those brows—those eyes—that mouth—that nose—the lines drawn by a heavenly artist and guided by divine will had been transformed into the incarnation of Rakshasa, the Hindu devil.

“A man like *you* is not unknown to me,” Princess said, not stirring an inch in the now freezing hot springs. “We met in a London fog, a man who killed his friend and trampled his grieving daughter underfoot. An intense and thrilling man, but alas, one born of the opium dens. The two of you are different. As different as heaven and hell, and both fearfully beautiful. Enough to raise the hair on the back of my neck. The *you* that you are now—who are you?”

Princess quietly backed away, without raising a ripple. A red ring wrapped around her left shoulder. The arms dropped off at the joint. Without the slightest sign of pain on her face, she picked them up and stuck them back where they belonged, then sunk down into the water.

Her black hair spread out like streams of blood. Bright waves flowed from Setsura toward them. As soon as they touched the

strands of her hair, they changed into thousands of threads that twined around them and sank into the depths.

Setsura devil wires warred against Princess's hair. The rest of her body followed. As if following suit, Setsura submerged himself as well.

The waves stilled, the sun reflected brightly off the surface of the water. The dark green and blue sky calmly set the stage for the opening act, revealing nothing of the death struggle going on below.

Several seconds later—the red-streaked foam churned up. In a flash, it spread out like a net cast upon the waters, speaking of a singular conclusion.

But did the blood belong to Setsura or to—at that moment, a rumble shook the air. The heavens convulsed.

Chapter Three

A fearful scream sounded from the study.

The mayor's wife put down her nail file and jumped to her feet. On any other night, she would have ignored it. Every time he bought some strange thing from a bunch of strange people, he came home writhing in pain, scalded or stabbed or assaulted. A little yelling was to be preferred.

Tonight, though, she heard in that cry a touch of fear even she was unaccustomed to.

Before bolting to the study to demonstrate her undying trust and devotion, she had the sense to grab the phone off the dresser and call the security room. She then waited three minutes before leaving the bedroom. Whatever was happening to her husband and the security detail, it was enough time for the commotion to die down.

Combining the life insurance and government pension and condolence money, she could buy a fine place outside the ward. Oh, their daughter Chiho, on study abroad, would grieve, but it'd be all for the best in the long run.

Descending the stairs, the complete silence set her nerves on edge. If nothing had happened, then people should be coming out about now. She stopped in front of the door and craned her ears.

The hinges creaked. Her husband—Mayor Kajiwara—appeared in the eighteen-inch gap between the door and the jamb.

“What the hell are you doing!” she demanded at once, for he was inching along the floor on all fours. “You lose a contact?”

“In there—inside—in there—” Kajiwara pointed into the room.

“The security guard’s in the room? What about him? And why is the ward mayor crawling on the floor like a dog? Unbelievable!”

“He’s not—there—he’s *in* there—”

“Eh?”

“He got swallowed.”

“What?”

“We’re all in danger.”

His wife glanced to the right and left down the hall. There was an old European suit of armor—more of the junk her husband collected—she grabbed the long sword from the scabbard strapped to its waist.

She might not have cared if he got assassinated when she wasn’t looking, but the sight of her frightened husband right before her eyes kindled a long-dormant love.

“Hurry up and get out of there,” she said, raising the sword over her shoulder like a baseball bat.

He inched slowly through the doorway. His chest emerged, then his waist and his ass—but she didn’t look at his big ass because snarling and snapping at it was a big gaping mouth, followed by a white furry face and a pair of gleaming red eyes.

“A tiger,” she gasped. She pushed the door open wider. A completely different scene presented itself to her—a long torso covered with steel-blue scales—not a snake—snakes didn’t have clawed feet—the mouth was almost a yard wide. From beneath its snout dangled a whip-like beard.

“A dragon?” she said.

“A dragon,” Kajiwara answered.

There was something off about the dragon’s mouth. Instead of a tongue, an arm grew out of its mouth, still wearing a shirt sleeve. Some might have taken the gun still clenched in the hand as an ironic accent, but the mayor’s wife thought it a bit gauche.

“Dear—dear—”

She didn’t notice the sudden weight of her gown. She thought as well her misty gaze was due to tears. Her forehead was damp with sweat.

A flash of electric blue filled the hallway. And again. This time she took note of the light’s jagged edge. Lightning. The dragon was calling forth a tempest. Finally she realized why her gown was drenched. The water running down her forehead was from a thunderstorm—inside the house.

The tiger roared. Four neat holes opened up in the pants of the mayor’s pajamas. Left there by the tiger’s fangs. The tiger lumbered towards her. The mayor’s wife closed her eyes and felt its hot breath on her.

And suddenly it vanished.

Cautiously, trembling, she opened her eyes to see the back end of the giant tiger as it was drawn through her abdomen. The largest part of its body—thicker around than her own torso—disappeared into the wall.

Looking up, what was clearly the shadow of a serpent's tail plunged into the ceiling above her husband, its steel-blue scales glittering.

Even after it disappeared, rain continued to fall from the unscarred ceiling for a little while longer. The second floor must be soaked as well. Her beloved husband was still hugging the carpet on his hands and knees.

In a slightly subdued voice, but still holding onto the sword and standing on her own two feet, she said in a shaky voice, "I don't know what you are looking for down there, but give the damned thing back to whoever you got it from!"

Ryuuki opened his eyes. A stone ceiling filled his gaze. His half-closed eyelids hid the upper half of the view. He couldn't move his body. He was completely numb. It was enough of an effort to keep his eyes half-open.

To the left of him creaked rusty old hinges. A startled voice said, "You're awake?"

"Ah—more or less, I guess," Ryuuki answered, the voice of the military man also called a general.

"As I suspected, a frightening man. You should have slept for the rest of your life."

The doll girl sounded impressed, and somewhat glad as well.

“I would have preferred that.”

“I understand, General Ryuuki.”

“Could you put me to sleep again?”

“If you so wish. However, my hands are full at the moment. You will have to wait a while. Your body should be paralyzed for the time being.”

“It is. It is better that way.”

“Because it keeps you from seeking the blood of others,” the doll girl said plainly. “Many visitors come to the house every night. We must do what we can to ensure you stay where you are. Oh, that reminds me. This may be a pointless gesture, but—”

The doll girl raised her delicate left hand and snapped her fingers. A set of four chains descended from the ceiling. She fastened the shackles around Ryuuki’s hands and legs.

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience.” She bowed courteously and left the small dungeon.

Wending her way down the twisting and turning hallway—of a length in no way indicative of such a small house—she finally came to a door. Opening it, a chorus of voices arose.

“Where is Miss Nuvenberg?”

“Please, look after this child.”

“Somebody—somebody’s after me.”

The doll girl slipped into the crowded living room and said in a loud voice, “As I told you the other night, Miss Nuvenberg is dead. Her younger sister is present, but is currently under medical care.” With a small sigh she continued. “Though my efforts may prove insufficient, let me hear what is on your minds. Please, state your cases.”

A man with a pale face and a head of mottled hair sidled up to her. “They’re gonna kill me. Any second now. Please, a job like this is the last thing I need.”

He thrust out his tongue. A rectangular lump skidded across the table. The blue-white tallow flame from the lamp wrapped the lump in a golden glow. It was a gold nugget.

“Send me back home. My children and husband are waiting for me. I don’t want to stay in this horrible city a minute longer.”

A slender middle-aged woman writhed on the floor. She sprang to her feet and tore open the front of her dress. The skin tore, crackling like old canvas, exposing her ribs. She screamed. Her fingers and hands melted and fused. Long sickles sprouted from the flat stubs of her wrists. The pain such a transformation inflicted was such that she wept bloody tears, tears that hit the floor and turned into small puffs of steam, leaving small holes behind. Acid tears that could dissolve stone.

“They’re coming,” shouted a black teenager. “They’re after me. Everybody’s trying to kill me.” His eyes were white, and devoid of pupils.

The others—including a blue-skirted girl, an old man in a polo

shirt, a *hausfrau* with an enormous head—moved away from him, not eager to be identified as "they," whoever "they" were.

The doll girl raised her arms. "Calm down, everybody. In the name of Galeen Nuvenberg, I assure you that no one will lay an untoward hand on you. Please stay here. Don't go anywhere."

The hem of her purple satin dress twirled around as she disappeared into the front foyer.

The street light bored an elliptical cone of illumination through the thick darkness. In that circle of light gathered a number of human shadows. From their long hair, white beards and strange overgrown fingernails, and clothing covered with curious designs and pentagrams—their background was obvious.

Witches and warlocks.

The doll girl said, "According to the Convention of Sorcery, you are forbidden from coming here. Please leave."

"Fine," said one white-bearded old man with a nod. "Hand over those inside and we will depart straightaway. Bring them out."

"I cannot," the doll girl said flatly.

Jeering laughter arose among the strange gang. One stepped forward. He was wrapped in what looked like military body armor. "You are refusing us? The stars tell us that two days ago, a large orb fell from the western sky. Namely, Galeen Nuvenberg is no more. And a new star from the Czech skies does not shine down on your house this night."

“Not to mention that tonight is Magic Town’s Sabbath. No one may leave their houses.”

“That has nothing to do with us,” the old man continued. “We are heretics, whom not even magic condones. Be nice and hand them over, else not even the daughter of Nuvenberg will be spared.”

“Dare to mention that name and you should also know the words Grandmother left to us: *Whether treading the path of good or evil, all of those on that path who come here seeking salvation shall find it and not be cast out*.”

A buzz again rippled through the crowd, this time swaying them noticeably.

“The man who can smelt pure gold inside his body surely suffers. So does the woman whose internal organs transform into tools of assassination. The boy altered to show him futures he does not want to see, he wishes to return home. You have taken away many others and subjected them to atrocious modifications. Shall I return them to your custody? No. In the name of Galeen Nuvenberg, never.”

The murderous rage flowing from the ten of them to the one of her stained even the darkness. These were those lured away by the sweetest potions—by the promise of sex and riches—in their pursuit of the dark arts. Turned once in that direction, they faced banishment from the discipline of magic. Discipline was hardly necessary in the pursuit of worldly desires.

And so they fled Magic Town and settled in places unknown, where they pursued the creation of various banned and forbidden objects. In order to do so, they repeatedly kidnapped and murdered

and practiced human vivisection, making themselves into the worst criminal gang the Shinjuku police had to deal with. So the cops finally urged the manmade mutants to escape.

Making the attempt on an almost daily basis, they were drawn by their better instincts to the home of Galeen Nuvenberg.

Fearing the power of the Czech Republic's greatest witch, the villains had done nothing until now. Now these sullied sorcerers bared their teeth at her front door.

"Whether individually or united as one, we possess powers that will not allow any objections. Does the girl made by Galeen Nuvenberg dare to stand against us?"

"If that is your wish."

They advanced forward, as a single military unit, having no need to wait for somebody else to make the first move. They appeared to grow as a single mass, impossible to mistake for any group of normal people, pressing against the darkness with each step. In another second, their giant feet would swallow up the young girl standing there before them.

The enormous shadow and the single slight one were about to merge. The giant faltered. The murderous vibe lost its intensity and had already begun to dissipate.

"Who are you?" demanded the old man, his white beard wavering.

The doll girl felt a presence standing behind her. "You!"

“Who the hell’s that?” asked the guy in the body armor.

“I am a resident of this house.” His gaze pinned the ten giants like daggers.

The doll girl’s voice froze the winter night. “He is General Ryuuki, and in his lifetime he has commanded thousands upon thousands of soldiers and sorcerers.”

Part Ten: Demons of Desire

Chapter One

The sorcerers all exchanged glances. Searching his memories, a vague flicker of recognition clouded the old man's eyes.

"General Ryuuki," he said under his breath. There were echoes of fear in those two words. After two thousand years, the name still could not be spoken without respect and fear. "It is said that in your death throes, shot through with the spears and arrows of the Hun, you dismissed your subordinates and strode off towards the furthest reaches of the northern desert. That you continue to live should surprise no one. After all, our job as well is performing the impossible."

He paused and looked straight at Ryuuki. "But even if you are that legendary hero, stand in our way and we will destroy you. Does the man named Ryuuki wish to make a stand here?"

"I do not desire to fight. I wish only to repay the debt of honor I owe this girl and this household. If you depart now, we need never meet again."

"What a joke," the sorcerer wearing the body armor said in a gravelly voice. "We'll write a sad end to that story of yours, General. And leave a few marks of our own on that body tonight."

The motors in his knees whirled as he took another step forward.

"Stop!" shouted the old man with the white beard.

"Kill him!" rejoined the person behind him.

Not waiting for the dispute between these two to resolve itself, the motorized sorcerer took off at a sprint.

Light leapt from the doll girl's right hand. Rosebuds, glowing a vivacious ruby red in the dark. The mechanical silhouette stopped in midair, chest and stomach studded with roses, like a strange, postmodern work of art.

It was hard enough to believe those strong and slender stems could pierce the hardened ceramic plates. All the more so that the sorcerer, covered with almost a quarter-ton of armor could be brought to a halt, completely in defiance of gravity itself. But what the normal bystander might see, these scoundrels saw through in a flash.

The rosebuds were bound together by golden threads invisible to the naked eye. Suspended by one end in the air, they held up the flowers and the martial magician. A moment later, the miracle wrought by that combination of strength and precarious balance gave rise to another.

The rose stems ran along the threads among the buds. A magnificent bed of roses sprang up between these uninvited guests and the girl, turning the armored man in the air into a sacrifice upon an arboreal altar.

Here and there on the stems, the bright red buds opened. The secret behind such brilliant colors was the life blood being sucked out of the airborne man.

"Splendid," the old man said. "What I should have expected from the creation of Galeen Nuvenberg. I am impressed that an inorganic

object could master such magic."

"I appreciate the compliment," the doll girl said with a nod.

"However—"

Like the physical manifestation of an exclamation point, rose buds tumbled to the earth, scattering across the ground like red snow.

"Now the farce comes to an end."

Still suspended in the air, the armored man shook his arms. All of the remaining flowers rained down. The stems and runners shriveled and died.

He floated to the ground and rolled his shoulders. "Sorry kid, but oil courses through my blood. Works well at keeping all my moving parts moving. Not good for watering the plants, though. Well, I guess it's my turn then. Take a look."

He reached out and seized Ryuuki and the doll girl by the necks. They were ten feet away. Ryuuki remained fixed in place. But the flexible, rubber-like titanium armor arm had already lifted the doll girl more than thirty feet into the air.

"I could send you to the stratosphere if I wanted," the armored wizard said with a small gloating smile. "Now and then, you read about a body falling from a height of three miles or so in the Shinjuku tabloids. That's my work. Oh, a squawking crow. A bad omen of your impending demise. Let's see how well you stand up."

He'd barely spoken the last word when he froze. A current of

energy raced through his body from his hand around the man's neck.

"*Damn—you—*"

The gurgle became a scream as his wrist twisted like a pretzel. The one-armed man looked up.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes," came a cheerful answer from high in the sky, beyond the reach of normal human vision.

"I'll leave what is up there to you. Leave what is down here to me."

"I appreciate it."

Ryuuki released his hold on the sorcerer's hand. Without waiting for the unconscious man to slump to the ground, a bald man shot a wave of energy from both hands at Ryuuki. Not bothering to dodge the blow, Ryuuki turned his arm toward the sorcerers.

The direct blast of demon *qi* bowed back the old man on the right. The second and then the third were forced to retreat. Four others chanted incantations.

Fire erupted from Ryuuki's mouth and stomach and climbed into the air. Inside the flames, the fearless face smiled. His arm reached out to them. They stood there unable to move as every cell in their bodies died.

The fifth was preparing his own magical specialty: "*Dark knife and fork.*"

A white-hot stab of pain shot through Ryuuki's skull. Red lines

crisscrossed his chest from the base of his neck on both sides to his hips. The invisible pair of knives ripped him open. Blood gushed out as Ryuuki clapped his arm across his severed torso. His closed his eyes. The blood faded, then disappeared.

"Get back!" the old man shouted. "I should have known, General Ryuuki. You are not a man to make an enemy of. We'll meet another day."

An invisible current struck him in the head.

Two minutes later came the flapping of wings. The big raven returned carrying the doll girl in his claws. The ground below was utterly still.

"What a freaking mess," groaned the raven, scanning the dead bodies strewn across the ground.

Nothing—no one—was left in one piece. Withered, twisted and desiccated, bodies had come apart as they hit the ground. Among them, the bottom half of somebody slanting out of the ground, no doubt dealt a death blow while burrowing into the earth.

"As magnanimous as a man such as General Ryuuki may be toward every kind of enemy, he becomes a demon of unparalleled proportions when confronting the killers of women and children. Our mistress said as much, and it appears to be true."

Hearing footsteps proceeding to the house, the doll girl turned around and asked, "You are coming back?"

"I have nowhere else to turn. Besides, I should not be allowed to seek blood as I please."

Without waiting for her to answer, the sturdy naked man passed through the front door and into the foyer.

"What a guy," said the raven, flapping its wings. "Our mistress and even Setsura say he's the one fellow they wouldn't mind having over for dinner. Hey, even I got a thing for him."

"That man is our enemy," rang out a voice like a bell, cold and hard. "And he must be destroyed. Better that he never came to our city in the first place."

They gathered in one of the narrow back alleyways in Yocho, men clothed in black. Even their pale faces were shrouded by the darkness.

"Tonight, this whole area," said the rugged man who appeared to be the leader. "Spare no one. They've got nothing to do with us. They are insects devouring this world."

The shadows around him nodded.

"Before dawn—at four o'clock—return to the vehicles. Go."

The shadows melted into the night.

A handful of people arrived at a nearby street. They moved to the intersection and looked around with intense and focused eyes.

"What are you guys looking for?" came a voice from above them.

They looked up—a kid wearing a polo shirt; a mutant studded with electrodes; a garishly made-up girl naked from the waist up; an housewife in a dress—a normal slice of Shinjuku street life that otherwise would have hardly drawn a second glance.

Their bared their teeth. The moonlight glittered off their fangs. They saw something in the sky. The mutant's body quivered all over. Blue light rose into the air.

"Hey!" came their startled responses. The light spread out in a kaleidoscope of colors. Several black figures descended to the street on rudimentary flying devices spouting jets of fire. Releasing their hold on the hand-controlled balloons, silently, like prowling cats, they closed in on the vampires.

These were the men who had assembled in Yocho only minutes ago.

What made the vampires stop and cower was not only the murderous intent of the assailants, but something else their transformed senses told them—they were vampires too.

Streaks of light—that solidified into stakes of white wood—pierced them as they crouched there. As the vampires arched their backs, clutching at the stakes, their attackers dropped to the ground behind them and severed their heads with huge Chinese broadswords.

"Nothing personal, but chaps like you are ruining this city."

"We finally found a place where we can live in peace. We don't want the likes of you fucking it up. You all deserve to be killed on sight."

Their identities could be easily ascertained from their motives—these were the residents of the Toyama housing project, the vampires who had assimilated into Demon City.

The Elder was dead. Yakou had not returned. Their homes had been destroyed by a nuclear blast for reasons unknown. Right now they lived in a building leased to them by the ward. Every night they went to work hunting down vampires.

They knew better than anyone that the number of new vampires was outrunning their abilities to eliminate them. They were equally hindered during the daylight hours, when vampire hunting was the most effective. Not to mention lingering doubts about the source of the nuclear strike.

Nevertheless, the Toyama vampires not vaporized in the attack had come together and now cooperated with the authorities in patrolling the Shinjuku nights. They knew as well that Shinjuku was their last refuge, and there was no compromising with this new breed that recklessly hungered after blood with no other end in mind.

“There’s that abandoned building down the street,” called another group from the other end of the alley. “The basement door is secured. No doubt about it.”

“Make it quick,” the leader said to his colleagues.

They neatly lined up the severed heads and bodies. On each of the still and quiet faces of the dead they placed a peach, wards against evil. But the white smoke rising from their own hands betrayed their own natures.

“We’re done.”

“Good.”

They raced down the street like a black wind. Ahead of them,

their eyes were drawn to a point of glimmering blue light. It was a woman. Her naked limbs swaying in the watery glow appeared as delicate as blown glass. Her face was shining so brightly her beauty was difficult to ascertain.

These men weren't the easily surprised type. If anything, what caught them off guard was the intuition that she was one of them. And the indescribable power she must possess.

And all the stranger, the leader couldn't tell whether she was friend or foe. She emanated the aura of a "virgin" vampire, that yet possessed an indescribably cool and refreshing feel.

This woman—*it wasn't possible*—was she in fact *Princess?* No way. *That* woman was said to be the rarest beauty in the world.

Without coming to a decision, the leader ordered his men to deploy. They rapidly formed a cordon around her at equal distances. She stood there, unmoving, her features blank. The leader's killer instincts wavered.

"Lady—who are you?"

She didn't answer. She didn't look at him. She took a step.

"How do we handle this?" asked one of his men, brandishing a stake.

"We don't know if she's with us or against us. Take a breather. It looks like she's lost her memories. Hey, can you hear me?"

She silently walked forward, the silhouettes around her keeping pace.

“Get her,” the leader commanded. In this situation, that he didn’t say to kill her was more than generous.

The men tossed peaches at her. They passed right through her and rolled up to the men opposite.

“Figures. Some sort of ghost or dual personality.”

“If we leave her be, it’s hard to see how she could attack anybody. Let’s get to that building.”

“No,” the leader objected. “There’s no way for us to know what kind of threat she poses. This is Demon City. She could be packing one mean punch. Ren—take care of her.”

“Roger that.”

From in back of her, he vaulted over her, slapped a paper talisman against her head, continued in his arc and stuck the landing. This evil-countering talisman could affix itself to even a transparent wraith.

The ghost here was not necessarily evil, but the existence of anything here that did not conform to natural law could inflict mental and physical confusion upon the surrounding environs. For starters, most humans who witnessed such ghosts would experience a dangerous drop of blood pressure and body temperature.

The woman’s feet stopped. Her features gradually emerged from the blue light. The leader and his subordinates were visibly shaken.

“You?”

They were familiar with the face of Takako Kanan. Then her eyes

flashed red.

“Halt!” cried out the leader.

The blue light rose up before him. Red stained the blue with a fleshy thud. Gouging at his neck, her arm around his waist, Takako pressed her lips against his throat.

Half a dozen stakes split the air, sinking through her back and protruding out her chest. The leader’s body shuddered. Takako released her hold. Her pierced body staggered and collapsed, her face turned upwards.

“Crazy bitch.”

The men ran forward and peered down at her face. Amidst the pool of dazzling azure light only her mouth gushed red. Though they stood there transfixed by the strange sight of terror and beauty, they too were vampires. They set upon her at once, full of hostility and vengefulness.

But even as they drove their fists and stakes into her, Takako’s hands and fangs tore at their throats without the slightest show of consternation.

Who would have believed that the best and brightest Toyama had to offer could be so easily rebuffed? As the cold ground absorbed the last of their convulsions, from Takako’s mouth poured thin, high, ear-shattering laughter.

Ah, she sounded so much like Princess in that moment. Still laughing, Takako started walking again. Her vacant face and distant eyes were once more surrounded by the blue light.

“Yes, keep on going.”

These words were suffused with infinite loathing. Thirty feet behind her stood another naked woman. However, the limbs and the contours of this bewitching body seemed shaped by the hand of God himself, while set into a countenance of heaven-blessed beauty were eyes of unparalleled evil.

Princess.

The light dimmed as she turned the corner. Following after her, Princess looked up at the eastern sky.

“The day is dawning. This night is dying. Where will you rest your pretty head? Remember—from tomorrow night onwards, this place becomes a literal city of death. She will see to it. *I* will see to it. I have destroyed kingdoms and empires. Do you think I will be outdone by the likes of her? Yes, let madness reign. Seek the blood of all living things. I will paint this town red. Hoh. Kikiou, it looks like I will bring to pass your dreams, perhaps even despite myself.”

She was certainly the one person who could make the words of indescribable evil cloaking this hideous pronouncement come true. She was certainly the one person who would. She would not be outdone by Takako. This would be a contest of massacres. What manner of fate had just been called down upon Demon City?

A sudden feeling of apprehension made Princess turn around. “Spirited away from the hot springs, and yet I managed to meet up with her. But where did Setsura Aki sally off to? Did he return to this city? Or to someplace else? That man will harry my thoughts to the very end.”

Princess set off in pursuit of Takako, dashing down the blood-soaked streets. Ah, the breaking of the day. In one more day—no, Demon City Shinjuku had but twelve more hours—a brief stay of execution during which he must prepare to repel this final assault.

Chapter Two

"Doctor."

Mephisto turned around at the sound of Yakou's voice. The white doctor, the dappled sunlight playing across his frame, strolled through the forest behind the Crystal Pavilion. That combination made for a picturesque scene of its own. The surrounding woods were no less extraordinary.

The roots of the gnarled trees snaked across the ground, growing markedly more slender as they rose higher, creating the image, at a glance, of an upside down vase. The leaves of the trees were closer to black than green in color, lending the white light slanting through the branches a sublime tint.

"I've been looking for you, Doctor." Yakou alit lightly on the ground in front of him and folded his wings across his back. "There is something I need to tell you."

"What is that?"

"In fact—" Yakou's voice dropped to a whisper. "I was just discussing things with Kikiou. To cut to the chase, he plans on ending your life by any means necessary."

"Is that so?"

"As you know, I must act in accordance to Princess's wishes. If Kikiou's surmise is correct—that the Doctor does not intend to align himself with our objectives—I will have no choice but to participate

in your extinction."

Needless to say, Mephisto didn't react in the least. "Is that all you had to say to me?"

"Yes."

"Having committed himself to this course of action, no matter what I say, Kikiou will be bound and determined to kill me. The question is what you will do then."

"There is something I wish to ask you," Yakou said in a determined manner.

"What is that?"

"Why did you join us, Doctor? To what end?"

"You use your eyes to see the physical world. But contained therein is also the meaning that refers to the eyes of wisdom."

In this doctor's case, such a meaning was more than plausible. Which was why Kikiou hadn't doubted Mephisto when he became a vampire with no other inducements.

"And as for any intentions to destroy this world?"

"No matter how beneficial the drug, an overdose may prove fatal. That doesn't make the drug's inventor a murderer."

"What are you saying?" Yakou countered. "That your curiosity has reached a fatal concentration? It is hardly impossible to imagine a supposedly beneficial drug being designed from the start with murder in mind."

Mephisto quietly looked back at Yakou. The meaning of “seeing” was at that moment stripped of what common sense might say. The beholder dismissed all such intentions, and entranced by a state of mind permeating body and soul, the beheld lost the ability to process all such thoughts.

Perhaps this is what it truly meant to *see*.

Only a superhuman exercise of will on Yakou’s part allowed him to even blink his eyes and break the spell. Mephisto turned around. “Wait,” said Yakou, blocking the way. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“You would only be as satisfied with my answer as you would be dissatisfied.”

“Then one more question. Will you and I come to blows in the end?”

“That all depends on you.”

“The prospect of us fighting does not disturb you?”

How many men had asked Mephisto that question before? The light dimmed. A shadow like a bird fell across Mephisto’s face in the shape of a wing. Yakou moved forward. The two silhouettes cast their outlines on the ground. And became one.

Then more quickly than before, Mephisto pulled back. “I do not think Princess put you up to this. Did Kikiou tell you to?”

“Forgive me, Doctor,” said Yakou, transfixed by the taste of sweetness on his lips. “Tell me your reason for becoming a creature of the night. Once I have understood that, I will not trouble you again. If the situations call for it, I will kill Kikiou and follow him in short order.”

“Such laudable aims.”

“Thank you.”

“I joined your little band because of Setsura.”

“Of course.”

“Can you kill me?”

“I don’t know,” Yakou moaned.

His allegiances were thrown into discord by the bewildering waves of desire. His loyalty to his sire, Princess, and his feelings

toward the doctor in white before him turned his iron will into crumbling adobe.

"If that is your intention, then I must fight you as best as I can manage."

"You needn't be so humble. If Doctor Mephisto takes up the sword, I can't imagine him yielding to the likes of me. However, we have Setsura Aki, and I—"

Yakou stopped. He bit his lower lip and cast his eyes down. Then raised them and looked at Mephisto.

"I don't want to fight you."

"Would that it were so."

"I am not lying. You would kill me whenever. With that same beautiful face, without the flicker of an eyebrow. The only thing that concerns you in this world is Setsura Aki. He is the center of your world, Doctor. You would sacrifice anything to save him. This place and everything in it—including Princess and the rest of us—are no better than dust. What exactly is he to you?"

"He is Setsura Aki."

"And who are you?"

"People call me Doctor Mephisto."

"And what do you call yourself?"

Mephisto held his fingers up to his lips. Yakou felt something close to vertigo. All fingers were the same. For this doctor, such distinctions did not exist. In a word, these were beautiful fingers.

“This must have been the elixir on my lips talking. Forget everything said up till now.”

Yakou thought he might. He felt his lips moving. For reasons he didn’t understand, his own voice followed. “What manner of man are you, Doctor?”

The doctor in white turned his head in the direction of the manor house. “I shan’t forgive that, Kikiou,” he whispered.

Kikiou wasn’t there, but Yakou shivered. Something deep in his heart urged him to keep going. *Now*. The time to expose the truth about this doctor was now, while Kikiou’s drug was still effective.

“Who are you?”

“By which you mean me?”

“Yes.”

“Me?”

Mephisto’s eyes looked off toward an infinite horizon. Yakou felt as if an infinite amount of time passed. Who was this Demon Physician in the first place? The man every person in Shinjuku sought after, the taboo no one dared touch, was now about to be violated by this magical elixir from four thousand years of Chinese history.

But is this right? Yakou thought in a sudden flurry of anxiety.

“I am—” Mephisto said.

“No!” Yakou cried. “Stop!”

In that instant, the heavens shook. In that instant, the Demon Princess and Setsura sank down into the depths of the hot springs. But more than the nihilistic terror of being sucked into empty air was the strange sorrow of being separated from the white doctor.

Right after which, Mayor Kajiwara and his wife were tormented by the mythical beasts.

"Ye gads! It's happening again!" Kikiou muttered.

He was in a room surrounded by mysterious mechanisms and chemical instruments and gadgets. He'd been thrown to the floor.

"A big one this time. Something must be wrong with the defensive measures. Back when Setsura made the leap, I made some emergency repairs, but apparently they didn't hold."

He'd dredged up the bitter recollection of Princess being severed in half, Setsura losing consciousness and ending up in the care of a gang of yakuza.

"So my considerable skills cannot fully compensate for the corrective forces of natural law? It's about time I double-checked the repairs. Well, then—"

Two seconds later came the sensation of being drawn through the air. The great warlock sprang to his feet. He grabbed his cane, leaning against the table, and carefully approached the window.

"What—!"

Within the "eternal" time he had conjured up here, how many phenomena could have aroused from him such an exclamation of

surprise?

The green faded from the world below. And yet Kikiou quickly noticed that the trees had lost none of their vigor. Right now, the canopy of the forest must be reaching toward another sun, stretching out its branches, spreading out its leaves—in another unseen world.

What caught Kikiou's attention in particular were the gnarled brown veins. These foundations of the forest sought after water in the pitch black, crushed rocks, bent and twisted themselves into every accessible nook and cranny. Now they seemed to draw in satisfied breaths beneath the deep blue sky.

It was as if this strange, sun-drenched world had turned upside down. Soaring up from the ground were the very roots of the trees.

Chapter Three

"My, my, my," Kikiou exclaimed in a hoarse voice, tinged by both curiosity and fatigue. "Trees, shrubs, grasses—billions of them. How to go about replanting every one?"

The color of the world changed again. The spectrum of the sun hadn't altered. The sun alone poured down its light with an intensity that made him squint.

"Oh." Kikiou's lips trembled. "Finally, the day has come. The heavens are opening."

What was he looking at? The sky, the infinite blue sky—it was being torn asunder. A band slowly traversing the heavens and the earth in unison, of infinite width and length, as if drawn by a giant brush wielded by a great and whimsical god. From it poured forth a languid light tinged an ugly orange.

"A room," Kikiou said to himself, though his meaning was not immediately clear.

At that moment appeared a giant sphere. The vertical edges of the sphere were cut off by the band, placing the sphere beyond it. The sphere glistened, as if submerged in water. Inside it—that could be just as well described as jet black—eerily shimmered another sphere twice as small.

The only agitation and movement, in fact, came from the fluid that contained it. The small sphere didn't move at all.

But the most unsettling thing in view stretched out behind the sphere, garish red threads like radiating electromagnetic waves. Strange and spindly limbs of varying thickness through which, it became clear, flowed a liquid of the same color.

Now the band of light changed to white. And yet the unsettling orange glow from before continued to spill in and stain the world below.

For a moment, the big black star glared down at Kikiou and the world. A moment later, a pink cover or membrane or *something* fell from a great height, extinguishing everything in front of the band of light.

And then a moment after that, jutting toward him from that base of that membrane, was a line of tall, black, pointed pines. At the same time, the upper part of the band fell, narrowed to a line, and vanished.

Kikiou's view was again suffused with blue. As if shrugging off a fleeting dream, the world regained its original color and configuration. He blinked several times and rubbed his eyes. He knew that these strange phenomena he'd just witnessed were closely intertwined.

"That this world would be touched by the likes of *that*. White tiger, dragon, what are you slacking off for? This is the one time you should be making your appearance."

A strong current buffeted his face, the wind kicked up by the movement of that membrane. The gale roared through the upside-down forest and faded off into the distance.

“That was one big blink,” he said to himself.

The old man stuck his right hand out the window. Less than ten seconds later, a soft cooing and the beating of wings came to rest on the tip of his finger.

The silver bird deftly folded its metal wings. The joints in its tiny legs bent and flexed as it scurried from the fingers to the wrist, up the arm and came to a halt on his shoulder. Kikiou cocked his head to hear what the whispering clockwork voice said.

“I see. Mephisto and Yakou too. Princess never left the hot springs. Setsura alone got out. A good thing I wasted no time constructing you. Don’t forget the task ahead of you. Now go.”

As if following the intent of his waving hand, the steel searching bird glittered beneath the sun and fluttered back into the sky. It soon became a dot in the distance and disappeared from view.

Having once allowed Setsura to invade their precincts as far as Princess’s mausoleum, and in order to prevent any additional blunders from not detecting his presence, he’d made and released a hundred of these birds into the air.

Their eyes peered into every nook and corner of the world, relaying everything they found to their closest compatriot and so on until the information reached their creator’s ears.

Kikiou left the manor house a dozen minutes later. He was wrapped in long gray robes, his favorite staff in hand, but there was no telling what was up when it came to this old man. Only that *this* was the world he had created.

After strolling unconcerned through the upside-down forest, the wizardly figure arrived at the Crystal Pavilion where Mephisto was being held.

The great warlock opened the door. There was nothing about the place to indicate that it had been affected at all by the strange phenomena. Without hesitation, he marched into the room.

As expected, he found Takako Kanan asleep on an old-style ebony bed. After her doppelganger had arisen in the Demon Pavilion, the little birds had told him that Mephisto had moved her here for further treatment. She lay there in a thin silk gown, appearing to not even breathe.

"Princess has disappeared. The doctor and Yakou are gone. Before I follow them, something must be done with her."

His narrow eyes narrowed even further. A fearsome glow poured from his eyes. An almost blinding *qi* radiated from his body, as if fringed with white fire. Then it vanished, replaced by a different kind of light—not so much ferocious as confused—something that had welled up in his memories.

"I have lived for over four thousand years and have encountered such an illness but once."

In the year 1704, in a remote village in the Kingdom of Prussia, a fourteen-year-old girl by the name of Ingrid suffered such a split personality. While her body lay upon her bed, her exact double roamed the village, indulging in unspeakable acts of lewd and lascivious behavior. As debauched as the everyday Ingrid was modest and devout, she indulged in every imaginable act of sexual congress

with every male from five to ninety-two. However their wives and mothers tried to protect them, she would pass through walls and floors.

"Just before her spirit returned, her body was burned by the enraged villagers. We shall never know what kind of woman she would have been after waking up. No one can say to this day."

Kikiou spoke these words aloud in a curiously cool voice. The dark and murderous rage directed at Takako was muddled by an equally deep and abiding intellectual curiosity.

He stroked his jowls in an expression of contem-plation. Soon he smiled. "According to the little birds, Setsura still remains here. There is no need to panic. The girl may be useful yet."

Setsura sneezed and said with a sniff, "Somebody's got to be pulling my leg."

More than a hour had passed after the Demon Princess had disappeared from the hot springs. He spent that time looking for Takako. He'd left his clothes to dry on a tree limb and sat down on one of the black rocks and sent his devil wires out to do the scouting.

All he'd gotten back for the effort was this sneeze. Now dressed, his clothes still felt damp. "That woman disappeared from the hot springs. Kanan-san must have gone as well."

Setsura shivered and stood up. They'd been in the water and were just about to go at it when a powerful vortex sucked Princess right out of that existence. Everything around the hot springs remained

unchanged, so it could not be a simple freak of nature. The vortex had been too selective in its target.

If he was going to have any luck ascertaining Takako's whereabouts in this world, he'd have to ask Kikiou. That was a pretty outrageous conclusion, but the manor house was where Setsura's feet were taking him. The sheer outrageousness of a proposition wasn't the kind of argument likely to sway the thinking of this young man.

He'd proceeded through the forest for five minutes when something strange came to his attention.

He was soaking wet.

He thought at first his clothes were still damp. But that didn't seem to be the case. Nor had he suddenly walked through a very deep puddle. No, it was as if his body had *become* water.

"That's funny."

He touched his cheek. His finger sank through the skin. He lowered his hand. The flesh of his face had lost all color and melted like ice. And when the movement stopped, the torn cheek restored itself in a flash, skin and muscle fusing together.

"I've somehow turned into water," Setsura muttered. This, at least, surprised him.

There could only be one cause. That warp in space had rearranged the molecules of the water and his body. Turn into a dream or water, he was a man in a hurry.

“At this rate, I’ll have to see Kikiou or Mephisto. I’d better get a move on.”

An invisible thread jumped out from Setsura’s right hand and wrapped around the branch of a tree. The man in black lifted easily into the air. His wires should have also transformed into water. Either way, they continued to work as well as could be expected.

Five minutes later, Setsura set down on the roof of the Crystal Pavilion.

First and foremost, he was concerned about Takako’s physical well-being. When Princess and the rest of them had left the Demon Pavilion, the devil wire he’d twined around Takako’s ankle communicated movement toward the Crystal Pavilion.

He descended from the roof, exercising all due caution, though it was not clear what kind of caution he ought to be exercising. He cast in another strand from the window to confirm the occupants inside.

“Good,” he said, in English for some reason. He landed inside the front foyer and knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

Setsura entered. The familiarity of the voice aroused no suspicions. Checking the layout of the rooms, he headed straight to the bedroom.

“Yo,” he said with a smile and a raised hand. He had the sense that Takako was being looked after.

Doctor Mephisto looked up from the table next to the bed and

said in his refined manner, “Welcome back. Did you find Kanan-san?”

“Nope,” Setsura said bluntly, as if to say obviously he would have brought her with him if he had. “That woman ditched me as well. It’s just not my day.”

“This isn’t like you’re baking *senbei*, you know.”

“If you want to go tracing this thing back, we’d find your goofball treatments are to blame. Is Kanan-san’s soul coming back anytime soon?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know.”

Setsura glared at the doctor in white. Hardly a menacing glare. More like a gun ready to be cocked and fired, Doctor Mephisto knew.

“So what do you plan on doing next with that fighting spirit of yours?” The look he gave Setsura was as piercing as the question he asked was light. “You collected something else along the way instead of Kanan-san. It’s getting a bit humid in here.”

Setsura turned the other way and started whistling softly.

“I would think a man of your age would have a less embarrassing repertoire than a nursery rhyme like *Cooing Doves*.”

Mephisto drew closer to him. Setsura hastily backed away. “What are you doing?” Though it was Mephisto who asked, not Setsura.

“Getting away from you.”

“Why?”

“Hands off, okay? You got that look in your eyes, Doctor.”

“I only wish to examine you. Hold out your hand.”

“The only one here you should be examining is Kanan-san.”

“She is resting peacefully. For the time being, I can do nothing for her. You are the greater concern.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Be a good boy and come here, else I won’t be able to give Kanan-san the attention she deserves.”

“Cheap shot.”

“I am not the kind to ever leave a patient behind.”

Setsura stopped. The white hand touched his forehead. “Seems you went for a swim.”

“Yes.”

“Seems like you drowned a bit in the process.”

“A bit.”

“Took in considerably more water than air.”

“Rub-a-dub-dub.”

“You must be treated right away.”

“Enough with the bad jokes.”

“I have not told a joke since the day I was born,” Mephisto said coolly. “I have crossed a hippopotamus with a shark on occasion, but with concrete motives in mind. I am always serious.”

“Yeah, I should have known.” Setsura clapped his hands with obvious irritation.

“I will prepare the medicines right away. Wait over there.”

“There’s no need for that either. I’ve got to get my hands on Kikiou.”

“Why?”

“To get the hell out of here. That woman and Kanan-san’s spirit must have been caught up in that space-warp thing.”

“Kikiou is not here presently. I went looking for him about a pressing matter and found that he had left.”

Setsura cocked his head to the side. “Damn. Well then, whatever I guess.” He sat down in the chair on the side of the table opposite Mephisto. “How long is that going to take you?”

“Kikiou is a great alchemist. So it comes as no surprise that the place is well stocked. Preparing the compounds should take but a minute or two.”

“Hey, close is good enough, so don’t dawdle.”

Setsura furrowed his brows and rubbed his shoulders. Where his fingers pressed against the skin shimmering drops of water welled up, creating small wet stains on the floor. The one flowed into the other until a rather large dark shadow had formed.

Call it the drippings of a ladykiller and the metaphor would come too close to the real thing, as if attired as stylish young men do, it sprawled on the second floor of a small restaurant to the accompaniment of a *samisen*, one after the other leaving their effusing essence behind.

Mephisto turned to the laboratory equipment arrayed on the table next to the bed and began mixing the compounds. To ordinary eyes, his hands would have moved in a blur.

He selected a bottle, opened the top, measured out a quantity into a sterile measuring spoon and poured that into a mixing mortar. This process took less than three seconds. It was only the white doctor's hands that switched into a fast-forward mode. And suddenly returned to normal.

"Done."

Mephisto got up and went over to Setsura and held out his right hand. There was a white capsule in his palm.

"Just one dose, but the efficacy is guaranteed. Go ahead."

"Yes, yes," said Setsura, taking it.

"Would you like a glass of water?"

"Done," Setsura said, popping it into his mouth and holding up his hand.

"The effects should become evident shortly."

"What effects?"

"Your body temperature will drop, and your breathing will grow

ragged."

"Jeez." Setsura's body suddenly stiffened.

"Then you will feel an intense pain in your heart. I could address it, but there is not enough time. After that, you will be the same as any normal dead person."

Setsura lay down on the table, his body twitching. The spasms were intense enough to make the table shake.

"How are you doing?" Mephisto asked, turning to the door. Though the real Mephisto should have been, like Yakou, drawn through that warp in space.

"Good show," said the silhouette filling the doorway. Kikiou strode over to Doctor Mephisto. "I'd heard that the director of Shinjuku's hospital had his own double. Making my own in half an hour was quite an achievement, if I say so myself. Instilling the proper memories was a challenge, though."

Kikiou patted Mephisto on the back. This time, everything was going according to plan, and he had every reason to preen.

The first thing on Setsura's mind would be Takako Kanan. Knowing that he would seek the assistance of Mephisto, Kikiou exploited that chink in his psychological armor to plot his extinction. In fact, he had no concrete methods for achieving the latter. The poison could be nothing more than the product of calculating backwards from Setsura's abnormal change.

"I had intended to make use of the young woman, but that appears unnecessary. So leave her here or take with?" He thought it

over for a minute. “Leave her. Having joined Princess’s brood, Doctor Mephisto should return here. But no matter how many of *you* there are, lacking my powers, the question remains whether you can return her to her original state. In the meantime, let us finish him off. If you would, Mephisto.”

“Understood.”

The white doctor hoisted Setsura onto his shoulders and slipped out of the room, Kikiou following after him.

Part Eleven: Dark Aura

Chapter One

"Is he asleep?" The fat lady asked the doll girl when she emerged from the steel door and shut it behind her.

"Yes," she answered with a nod of her small head. The glittering strands of gold spilled to one side of her face in a silky wave, casting off flickering beads of light.

It wasn't the lamp in the ceiling lighting up the doll girl's hair, but the early morning glow pouring in from a crack in the curtains. Demon City still slept soundly at four o'clock in the morning.

"Even I am taken aback. He could have run for the hills but chose to return of his own accord."

Her mouth bent into a frown. Tonbeau Nuvenberg sighed. As a precaution, she'd gone to the hospital to have the wound looked at —the one inflicted by the vampire gangbanger at the apartment in Shin-Okubo. But hearing that she'd be charged for the visit had returned home an hour ago.

While basic hospital services were free for residents of Shinjuku, those from outside the ward were charged an arm and a leg. And Tonbeau was very much an alien here.

The doll girl updated her on Ryuuki's status. Tonbeau sat down at the living room table and mumbled and grumbled as she wracked her brains. All of a sudden, her eyes flew open wide.

"We'll kill him, of course!"

“What?” the doll girl said with a start.

There was normally no end to the fat lady’s greed, her avarice only outmatched by her timidity. That is, until she came up with some hair-raising scheme that only the sister of the Czech Republic’s greatest witch could pull off.

“That’s it! Leave a piece of trouble like that just lying around and nobody could say what’s going to happen next. He’s all peaceful as a baby now that’s he’s drunk his fill and all, but once the cravings start, it’s gonna come back and bite me in the ass.”

A vulgar image to conjure up, but not off the mark, especially after the death and carnage the doll girl had witnessed. As the old saying went, even the hunter refrained from killing a bird who flew to him seeking shelter. But be seized by the ravenous hunger for just one night, and this bird would bare its poisonous claws and fangs and turn into a demonic vulture.

That was why, in any case, the duty of the hunter was to kill the prey.

“But—” the doll girl said. “How to destroy him?”

The impossibility of the task had been well demonstrated in the Shinjuku police station special detainment lockup. Even a staking by Galeen Nuvenberg hadn’t caused any deterioration to Ryuuki’s body.

Tonbeau furrowed her brows and scratched her butt in studious contemplation. “Push come to shove, there’s nothing special about that vampire. The only sure way to turn him into dust is to destroy

his sire. But that is a whole lot tougher than giving him a long nap."

"It is as you say."

Tonbeau's eyes flashed. "Don't you have anything to be upbeat about?"

"What?"

"Something smells fishy to me. Somehow or another, when it comes to killing him, seems like maybe you aren't so raring to go."

"Not at all."

Even as she spoke, the doll girl's glass heart sent an unprecedented volume of blood flooding through her body. This was one of the most frightening characteristics of her mistress's sister. Grandmother's intuitions had reached an almost supernatural acuity that covered all of creation in ways that Tonbeau's could never compare with. But in certain respects, nothing could approach her own ominous abilities.

"Well, that's okay," Tonbeau said stiffly. "You're my big sister's servant. You're not going to betray us, no matter what. But there's one more way of doing away with that chap. What do you imagine it is?"

"I don't know."

"We predestine the fact that it will happen."

The doll girl drew her picturesque eyebrows.

"You still don't get it? *That*. We make use of *that*."

"And by *that*—"

"I've always wanted to give *that* a whirl." Tonbeau's voice hushed to a whisper. "The very experiment banned by the Vatican in the year 1400, that only Doctor Faustus successfully pulled off. Even my audacious big sister did not dare dabble in that arena."

The doll girl's eyes flew open with surprise, with an expression of horror that came to human eyes on gazing upon the black death.

"It is not possible. No record of it was ever made!"

"No, I'll do it. I'll give it my best shot. There is nothing we can do *but* that. Faced with such a powerful vampire, we cannot turn away from predestining him to destruction."

Tonbeau clenched her fists in a show of determination. The doll girl didn't raise an objection to this silly and ostentatious show of bravado. More than respect for her mistress's sister, the black hand of fear had seized her celluloid throat.

Reading in between the lines of their conversation, "destruction" could be "predestined" using the "record." Even in Demon City Shinjuku, there should be no one capable of such a thing. What was this "record"? And what would Tonbeau do with it?

"Let's get down to work, then."

The woman who looked like a paper bag stuffed with pastries rolled up the sleeves of her hamhock-like arms. The doll girl turned her eyes toward the foyer.

"Somebody coming?" Her vim and vigor dimmed and she asked

the question in a disquieted manner, perhaps because of having messed with a JDF Special Forces contingent on a previous occasion.

"Yes. A civilian automobile. A man."

A knock came at the door.

"Tell him to strip before letting him in. He could be carrying one of those suitcase nukes for all we know."

The doll girl didn't say anything as she went to the door and threw back the bolt.

"I apologize for barging in so early in the morning," said a very haggard Mayor Kajiwara, stepping into the house.

"You've arrived at exactly the right time!" Tonbeau said with an excited little jump. "You don't need to apologize for anything. I was just thinking of ringing you up. We need to talk. Supposing I was able to rid Shinjuku of all that ails it at the moment—"

"I'll pay whatever I can." In front of the pair of greedy eyes, he thrust out a brown overnight bag.

"What?"

"Whatever I've got in my pockets. But first you need to take care of *this*."

Tonbeau and the doll girl exchanged glances. The mayor placed the bag on the table and unzipped it with stiff hands. He reached in, then thought better of it and backed away.

"I put it in there, but lack the confidence to extract it. If you

would, please."

"Me? No way. What the hell is it?"

"A wooden box."

"A box?"

"Yes. But no ordinary knick-knack. There's a dragon and tiger painted on the cover. They escaped last night."

They didn't doubt what he said was true, not in Demon City. At the same time, Tonbeau picked up on something else.

"They were certainly there to guard the box," she observed, a white-hot intensity in her voice. "If they escaped, it must have been because they were beckoned by the person they were supposed to protect. Or went to her on their own volition."

"That's not all," Kajiwara said, wiping the sweat from his brow. "After the creatures took off, I peeked inside the box and saw green forests and fields beneath white clouds. And from the window of a magnificent mansion, an old man the size of a grain of sand looking back at me."

"You don't say."

Tonbeau wasn't addressing the mayor, but the bag on the table. She opened it and peered at the thing inside. Her beefy arms reached in.

"I shut the top right away. A minute later I tried to open it again, but couldn't. I wasn't dreaming. So I brought it here. An item like this can't be casually tossed aside. This is a mystery that needs

unraveling. I'll make it worth your while."

Her fat wrist disappeared inside the bag and stopped. "Worth how much?"

"I'll make the necessary arrangements."

"Make sure those *arrangements* amount to more than a trifling."

"Rest assured they will be made."

Tonbeau harrumphed and fell silent. A trifling was all she could expect. She wouldn't have been surprised at all to learn the mayor's salary. Though official salaries amounted to no more than sparrow's tears, the movers and shakers in Demon City could expect to receive generous additional perks and benefits. The "honorariums" bestowed on Shinjuku's civil service whenever a "specialty product" was added to the list of "allowable exports" were frequent and generous.

Tonbeau smiled, as if to say: *Then let it be so*. There would be many more ways to skin this particular cat.

"Let's see what the fuss is all about, shall we?"

She buried her arms in the bag down to her elbows. And removed them without incident. The doll girl focused her attention on the cracked and desiccated surface. Small colorful flecks fell off.

"A part of the paintings. It seems to have been damaged when the creatures fled."

Tonbeau seized the lid. The mayor took a deep breath. She exerted all her strength but the lid didn't budge. She jiggled it back

and forth and lifted the box off the table.

Then softly set it down. “It is sealed with magic, and securely at that. However, Mr. Mayor, those guardian beasts didn’t lay a hand on you. They were in a hurry to get somewhere. Or crazed out of their minds. You give the box a good shaking?”

“Ah, yeah,” Kajiwara answered with a vague nod. “The top wouldn’t come off again, so I turned it upside-down too.”

“And maybe that drove them out of their little heads. I wonder how old this thing is. I haven’t seen a complex gadget like this in a hundred years.”

“Is there nothing you can do about it?”

“I can’t make any firm promises, but—hoh, this is beginning to sound like a business negotiation.”

“I have promised you remuneration.”

Tonbeau raised the box overhead. That view proved no more revealing. And yet she smiled broadly. “We’ll do whatever we can do. I assume you won’t mind entrusting it to our care for the time being.”

“That would be fine.” Kajiwara finally felt the tension beginning to unwind. “In fact, I stopped at Mephisto Hospital on the way here, but the director was nowhere to be found.”

“The doctor wasn’t in?” said the doll girl.

“He hasn’t told us where he is, only that he is working on behalf of the city, he and Aki-san too.”

“Yes.”

“Well, then. I shall bid you goodbye. My wife is waiting with the car. Later.”

After Kajiwara left, the dawning light mixed with a heavy silence that filled the room.

“This is it,” Tonbeau said in a tired voice. “No mistake about it.”

“Can it be opened?”

“One way or another. The mayor managed to peek in once. The timing probably coincided with the mechanism being thrown out of kilter. In that case, we should be able to duplicate a similar chain of events.”

“I certainly hope so.”

“The problem is, which comes first? The box or that lover boy you’re so fond of?”

Tonbeau pursed her lips in evident pleasure. Her ability to look the total bitch no matter how good a mood she was in was one of her more particular characteristics.

After watching the mayor’s car speed off, the head nurse turned to the front foyer. Her lips parted in a silent expression of surprise. There was the person the mayor had come to see—and missed. The doctor in white.

“Director, when did you get back?”

“This very moment.”

The head nurse stared at him. Five seconds was the limit. Any longer than that and her vision dissolved into a misty rainbow. Her goal that year was to lengthen the time she could look at him by one second. Now at five seconds she must look through the shell of the authentic and the pretense to the physical and the transcendent.

There was nothing wrong, and yet as they stood there in the half-light of morning, something still seemed "off" about him.

"Was there anything else?" Mephisto asked.

"No, nothing. Oh, Director, the mayor was just here to see you."

"Official business?"

"No. His wife was doing the driving. I told him you were out and he left without giving any reasons." The head nurse narrowed her eyes and searched her memory. "He was carrying a big duffle bag. I assume it contained something he wished to show you."

Mephisto turned his gaze toward the car, cruising through the front gate. "Any indication of where he was headed next?"

"No, but if you allow me to hazard a guess, sir—"

"Go right ahead."

"Coming expressly to see you, and discovering you were not available, he did not seem terribly disappointed and drove off in a hurry. He surely had another resource in mind. In this city, though, any such resources to equal that of yourself would be limited in the extreme."

"Then it seems I have no choice but to meet with the mayor.

Nurse, I'll be in my room. Please refuse all visitors for the time being."

"I understand, sir." She bowed as the hospital director strode toward the doorway, the morning light gradually exposing the shapes and details of the world around them. She couldn't explain why, but the director seemed to her at that moment to be fleeing the dawn.

Shortly before the mayor left the Nuvenberg residence, a strange group of shadows surrounded a flower shop in Yocho. The dark sky was still barely tinged with blue, and the streets were empty except for this particular throng of silhouettes.

Any witnesses would surely describe them as bathed in some sort of acid, and give them a wide berth. And they would have been correct.

Wearing dark suits and fedoras, they all were spouting white smoke. They all knew the fate that awaited them. They wouldn't die. But the sun would scald them terribly, and they would carry the scars with them as long as they lived—perhaps for eternity.

Even this gentle and wan sunlight was anathema to vampires.

So what were they doing here? Why risk the hellish pain of being burned alive inside their indestructible bodies instead of hastening home to their peaceful abodes?

"You're sure this is it?" asked one.

They were at the back door of the establishment.

"Yeah," said somebody else. "Got confirmed reports. Watch your

step.”

They all nodded as one. Right hands slid inside their suit coats. Without another word, the signal went out. The door wasn’t locked. They were through it in a flash.

The back of the shop consisted of a rose garden. They searched for their quarry and found it. Those citizens of the city turned into creatures of the night having scattered in all directions, here in this flower garden that should surely be seeing no visitors at this time of day, surrounded by all its gaudy excess.

White roses, yellow roses, red and purple roses—and in the center of the roses warring for supremacy a dark stain was slowly reaching outwards. The color of the flowers themselves were changing.

And in that center more beautiful than any flower, the voluptuous body of a naked woman, dreaming whatever dreams the Demon Princess dreamt.

Chapter Two

Somebody asked, “Can she be destroyed?”

The rest turned censorious eyes on him and he faltered a bit. That particular question was taboo. And yet—

“Who knows?” someone else said. Nobody reacted this time, because it was the truth.

“All we can do is try and see,” came a third opinion.

They all agreed. Their bodies still trailed plumes of smoke. The greenhouse wasn’t entirely dark. Their outlines wavered as if underwater, while pulling into sharper focus.

The song of morning was to the Toyama residents a funeral dirge, announcing the arrival of pain and suffering. Their skin singed and crumbled like a match held to paper, their nerves and organs deteriorating as they stood there.

Even as they withstood this suffering, they raised their stakes over the chest of the Demon Princess.

“I’ll go first. The rest of you follow in turn.”

These directions and the actions that followed commenced in an orderly fashion. The meaning of “in turn” wouldn’t have been apparent at first to the uninitiated. The men lined up—not in a straight line—but in a circle around her.

And no ordinary circle at that. One end of the circle expanded

out, the other end forming a ring inside it. Looking down from above, they had formed a human helix.

Anyone who knew something about the occult, and about the nature of the woman sleeping surrounded by flowers at the center, would have applauded the effort—this perfect execution of an execution.

The spiral helix was the structure most accommodating to the growth of human life. Life that formed in a logarithmic spiral grew in equal proportions outside and in. The extinct *ammonites* and the extant nautiloids of the mollusk phylum both traced beautiful spiral shapes.

The difference between the former—that disappeared with the dinosaurs—and the latter—unchanged for millions of years—was that between a tight helix and the more relaxed logarithmic spiral. The difference between finding a balance in life and the ultimate lack of it.

Following these patterns of ideal growth ensured that the energy born in the center would reach its maximum strength.

Wafting with white smoke, the men positioned themselves to maximize the extermination of the Demon Princess.

“Let’s do it.”

The head man bent over Princess’s right side, a hammer in his right hand, a foot-long wooden stake in his left. He placed the sharpened stake next to her pale, round breast, just above her heart. The hammer raised, the hand didn’t move.

In that moment, a force erupted from the center of the helix, tying every one of the men together, and streaming into the hammer.

The head of steel swung down. The stake sank into her body. Her eyes shot open, her lips frothed with blood—though which came first was impossible to say.

A gasping gurgle rose from her throat. It was as if the night itself rushed out of her mouth, painting the faces of her killers with a spray of blood. One turned away from the writhing body. Another shut his eyes. They were not without compassion.

But far more compelling emotions rose to their faces and stiffened their resolve. Invisible energy surged down the helix. The hammer again hummed through the air. The Demon Princess unleashed a scream.

These were her unmistakable death agonies. All the more surprising was the arousing nature of her movements.

Their eyes were drawn inexorably to the root of her flailing thighs. The sight of her heaving chest scorched their retinas. Her bloody hands painted streaks of blood across stomach, thighs, sides.

Her own body became the canvas, like a tortured and tormented artist throwing herself at her obscene masterpiece in a mad frenzy.

Wordless moans issued from their mouths. Their groins grew hot and hard. One bolted towards Princess. The man next to him grabbed his arm. He shook it loose. Too late to stop him, he flung himself onto her naked body.

Somebody screamed. From the gap where the man had been

standing, the sacred power dispersed into the air.

The spiral helix shattered.

With a shout, the man with the hammer raised up the mallet of wood and steel. A piercing clear gaze shot into his own eyes. He reared back as the head of the hammer sank into his own skull.

The men stumbled backwards. Before them, the gore-smeared body rose to her feet.

Here was the Demon Princess. The wooden stake pierced her left breast. The bloody tip jutted out her back. Her chest and flanks were painted bright red and dotted with white and yellow petals, the roses tossed and flung as she danced and writhed, attaching themselves to her with her own blood.

There could be a no more grotesque sight. And a no more beautiful woman.

The Toyama men who had pounded the stake through her gazed in stupefaction. Princess smiled. These were not the first men to behold that smile.

So had Emperor Jie. And Emperor Zhou. And Emperor You. What came before would surely come again, and now those winds of destruction were blowing through Demon City Shinjuku.

The men silently charged forward, suffused with fighting spirits that defied their inevitable fates. Princess made no effort to evade them or their slashing stakes. Then came the sound of tearing flesh. The spikes sank into her back.

The men retreated again.

She was stabbed and skewered. Through her chest, her stomach, her thighs, a single stake through her throat and out the back of her skull.

"Perhaps if you made another one of your clever curlicues?" Princess said in a hoarse voice. "Oh, not enough time? Well, then I should return these stakes to their proper owners."

She yanked the stake out of her throat and tossed it away as if discarding a toothpick. She barely seemed in a hurry, and yet the man moved as if entranced, and the stake caught him full in the chest.

The man who had stabbed her with it in the first place.

Princess's right hand flicked seven more times the same way. Seven stakes pierced the hearts of the seven remaining men. They toppled to the ground.

The smoke wafting up from their bodies increased in magnitude. Yet the triumphant Demon Princess was spouting that murderous smoke as well. Light poured in through the door.

"The only other person who exposed my body to the light of day was Ji Chang of King Zhou's Privy Council. You managed the same on this unhallowed ground. Well done."

Paying no attention to the bits and pieces of her skin flaking and falling off, Princess walked over to the men already half-engulfed in flames and stepped on the chest of one. The sternum caved in like embers in a fire, consuming the rest of the body in pitiless flames.

After treading on all eight, Princess narrowed her eyes and turned to the doorway. The sheets of blood had charred and turned black, the wounds clotted and sealed.

“Remain here, and their allies will inevitably arrive as well. What a nuisance. I need to find some temporary shelter until nightfall. Good thing I implanted that map Kikiou made in my head. In a few more hours, Takako and I will wreak carnage on this city.”

Several minutes later, not even bothering to shield the sun from her face with her hand, the Demon Princess grandly set off beneath the bright sunlight. Clothed in a robe of rose petals, her nude body charred, smoked and smoldered.

Early in the morning, a few minutes before five o’clock. Neon lights lit up the fading night like those bioluminescencing fishes from the bottom of the sea. The street life was drained of its verve, but schools of fish still swarmed to the feeding grounds.

In Kabuki-cho, on a block in the center of Demon City, the grimy unkempt heartbeat of life went on.

A marquee identified one establishment as *The Flying Dutchman*. It hadn’t been rebuilt since the Devil Quake. No one could remember how high it had once reached. The second floor and above had been wrecked and those scars still remained. Now it was an old one-story brown building.

Left of the plaza’s former fountain and right past the Koma Theater and descending toward Okubo brought the adventurous sightseer to the boundary avenue of the love hotel district. Turning right, and a couple more rights after that presented a view of a block

utterly destroyed by the Devil Quake.

A two- to three-hundred-square-yard wasteland of bricks and debris. The lights of the bar came from a single structure at the northern end of the field.

At this hour of the morning, the pedestrian traffic was understandably light. Peering through the wavy stained glass windows revealed a steady stream of customers arriving and departing the place.

People unfamiliar with the place often stopped by. But because of the unique atmosphere there, they rarely stayed long. Though it wasn't a members-only club, the regulars occupying the cramped, twenty-five-by-thirty-foot space had been there night after night since it opened.

Even a free spirit visiting first thing in the morning wouldn't shift the mood. The bartender might flash a disinterested look toward the door and place a glass on the counter. The patrons playing poker at a nearby table would barely spare a backwards glance.

"Hey," a woman said in an aggrieved voice. The woman's body was wrapped in a blue glow. She shifted her hips. The blue light shimmered. "I come all the way here to wet my whistle and nobody pays the slightest attention. My feelings are hurt. Hey, look at me."

An old man at the poker table puffing on a cigar turned and looked at her. He had blond hair and blue eyes and high cheekbones. The way it all went together with the beard and mustache suggested a strong Anglo-Saxon heritage.

He was wearing a navy blue top and bottom, and a white hat with a blue visor. “That hat—are you a ship’s captain?”

He answered in fluent English. “Aye, aye. Benjamin S. Briggs, at your service.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Takako Kanan.”

She bowed in a fashion that would have been more befitting had she been wearing a crinoline hoop skirt. But her blue and naked body created a rather stranger scene.

“I appreciate the introduction. So, Miss, where are you from?”

Takako craned her neck and gazed mischievously into space. “I’m sure I’m from somewhere. I can’t remember where that is.”

The atmosphere in the place suddenly shifted.

“Whoa.”

All eyes in the place focused on her.

“Yo, Miss, come over here.”

“We got an empty seat right here.”

The warm invitations came one after the other. Takako instead sat down at the counter.

“What can I do for you?” said the bartender, smiling like a completely different person.

“This isn’t any ordinary bar, is it?”

“You’ve got an observant eye.”

“I guess I do. The captain, that old man, that person over there—they’re all wearing clothes from a century ago.”

The last one she’d pointed to had on a farmer’s bib overalls and a thick cotton shirt. Another was wearing a bomber jacket and aviator glasses. The bartender sported some unfashionable getup from a bygone era.

“It’s not a masquerade club. Perhaps a watering hole for psychiatric outpatients?”

The bartender frowned. “That is David Lang. Over there is Amelia Earhart. You’re familiar with those names?”

“They do sound familiar.” Takako’s eyes glowed, or rather, her whole body did. She gazed back at the bartender. “A farmer who vanished off the face of the earth in the American state of Tennessee. A pilot who disappeared shortly before the Second World War. Now that you mention it, that sea captain, I thought his name struck a bell. Ah, I see.”

“You’ve figured it out?” The bartender looked at his patrons with sad eyes. “Those who come here have nowhere else to go, no kith or kin, no home or tombstone to call their own. And yet they live on. Not enough time has passed to get used to the now, and yet having been on the *other side*, they can’t go back to a normal life. At the end of the day, Demon City and this bar is all they’ve got.”

“You don’t say. And you’re the owner?”

“No. A far mightier man than me. He established this place for them. Speaking of which, today is the seventh year. He should be

entering Tokyo Bay. You might be able to catch a glimpse of him here."

"Hmm. Well, I should be on my way."

As she drifted away, the bartender called after her, "Come again! Those who return only to find they have no place to go are always welcome here."

"Thank you." Takako said to herself as she made her way to the door, "Such a pitiful lot. I couldn't bring myself to destroy them."

A man waited for Takako to leave before entering the Flying Dutchman with heavy steps. The smell of the ocean wafted about him as he passed.

"Good to see you, Boss!" called out the bartender.

The rest of the patrons turned their attention to the man in the soaking wet sailor's coat with respectful and appreciative eyes. "Welcome aboard, Captain Van der Decken," somebody said.

Captain Benjamin S. Briggs was a Puritan from Massachusetts. On the fourth of November 1872, he departed New York and set sail for Genoa. That same year, on the fourth of December, the Mary Celeste was discovered adrift in the Atlantic Ocean with not a person on board.

Typical of the Puritans of his era, the captain was a strict man, on himself and others, and was said to recite a verse of the Bible in a loud and sonorous voice every day.

David Lang was a farmer in Tennessee. On the afternoon of

September 23, 1880, while setting off to inspect his fields, he disappeared in full view of a local minister and his children.

Amelia Earhart was a famous woman airplane pilot in the years leading up to the Second World War. On the first of June, 1937, she and her navigator, Fred Noonan, launched their second attempt to circumnavigate the globe. On the second of July, they left Papua New Guinea and never arrived at their destination, Howland Island.

One theory held that they were on a secret intelligence gathering mission for the American government, were captured by the Japanese military and executed.

According to Wagner's version of *The Flying Dutchman*, obstructed for nine days by terrible storms and high seas while rounding the Cape of Good Hope, an arrogant sea captain named Van der Decken cursed God and Heaven in frustration. As a result he was condemned to sail the Seven Seas without setting foot on land.

He was finally redeemed by the love of a faithful woman. This story seems to have been based on that of Bernard Fokke of the Dutch East India Company, whose mastery of the seas was so complete it was rumored that he had made a pact with the devil.

Half an hour later, the blue lady came to a stop on a street near Yocho. Going right down the alley fifty yards ahead of her would bring her to a camp of vagrants.

A strange sight came down the road, a beautiful woman covered with red roses and trailing plumes of white smoke. Takako melted though the shutters of a dry cleaners and emerged after the woman had passed.

Takako smiled. "I wonder where that Methuselah of a Princess is headed? I didn't imagine she'd take a stroll in the middle of the morning. There's no way she can keep that up for long. I guess I'll just have to wait and see."

At last contending with the golden rays of dawn, the blue light followed after the lady of roses.

Chapter Three

Soon after those two women passed down the street, headed for parts unknown, a visitor arrived in a hurry at Mephisto Hospital. She asked to see the Director. The head nurse refused politely. The woman pressed, "Please tell him that Takako Kanan is my daughter."

This was indeed Takako's mother, Tomoko Kanan.

"He left strict orders to turn away everyone, even the prime minister, should he show up here."

Excepting one, she was wise enough not to add. She couldn't help feeling a tinge of jealousy toward the one person with a free pass to the director's office, no matter what. At the same time, the face of the handsome young man clad in black flitted through her mind, assuring her that, no, it simply wasn't possible.

"Then tell him this—I may know the location of the person who drank my daughter's blood."

"I'm sorry, but the director's instructions were unequivocal."

Tomoko backed away from the receptionist's desk and smacked the handbag hanging from her right shoulder with the palm of her hand. "Then I'll go tell him myself!"

"Don't be unreasonable!" the head nurse pleaded.

Tomoko had already headed past her down the hallway. But then her body seemed to freeze in mid-stride, as if her movements were

being recorded with a high speed camera. She'd been caught in a force field projected from the receptionist's desk.

At that point, she could be manipulated at will. The head nurse was reaching toward the control panel when the director's voice emerged from the intercom speaker.

"Let her pass."

The intercom mic was off. He must have been observing the whole thing, but the head nurse knew that wasn't the case either. Without another word, she cut the power.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience," she said politely. "Please proceed to the elevator at the back. It will take you to the director's office."

It was only afterwards that she was struck by how ominous the director's voice sounded.

The thick bands of shadow and firelight flickered across the two faces. The sound of burning crackled in their ears.

Not six feet away, a huge silo a hundred feet wide and three hundred feet high reached skyward. The light from the candles on the surrounding walls couldn't reach that high. The top faded into the pitch black. Even so, the stone ceiling above seemed to weigh down on them in a great dark mass.

The silo contained the heat source that fueled this world.

Between the two and the oval-shaped chute to the silo, that also apparently served as an incinerator, lay the body of Setsura Aki.

“And?” said Doctor Mephisto—Kikiou’s carbon copy—the glow from the flames playing like moonlight across his striking features. This carbon copy had at least preserved all of the aesthetic qualities of the original.

“Do it,” said his creator. “Only a bird witnessed what happened, but changes have occurred in his body. Before anybody can botch the next move, we should consign him to the flames. It is in all our best interests.”

“But to destroy such a living work of art and scatter the ashes, it seems such a sad waste.”

“You are giving this task too much thought,” Kikiou said, with a scathing glance at Mephisto. “I made you in haste, so perhaps your true self is awakening. That furnace burns at three-hundred-thousand degrees. So not even the ashes will remain. Toss him in. I have got to get back to repairing this world properly.”

“Yes.”

Mephisto bent over, hoisted up Setsura, walked to the chute and unceremoniously threw him in. His right foot caught on the edge of the chute. Mephisto grabbed it and stuffed it in and shut the door.

“Good. The rest is in your hands. Please continue with your research as you see fit.”

The great warlock strode out of the room. Mephisto watched him leave. He stood there for a little while longer like a beautiful statue, then nodded to himself and turned around and headed back to the incinerator chute.

He opened the door. The flames lit up his pallid face. The white doctor didn't hesitate but thrust both hands into the fire.

And pulled them out a second later grasping a black ankle. Mephisto gazed curiously upon the body of the *senbei* shop owner, that not even three-hundred-thousand degrees could singe.

"Any way I look at it, ashes to ashes is a waste. I shan't disobey Kikiou-sama's orders. But I shall at least bury him in a manner befitting me."

A minute later, carrying Setsura on his shoulders, he walked down the dark corridor. As handsome as Mephisto, as skilled as a pharmacist, and acting the same around Setsura, two peas in a pod. This was nothing more than a duplicate, who first and foremost deferred to Kikiou.

However, just as Kikiou feared, this quickly thrown-together doppelganger was exhibiting not only Mephisto's tics and mannerisms, but in a kind of living irony, whatever construed the wellspring of his true self.

And that faithfulness to his creator welded deep within his personality?

After silently treading down the corridor, the white figure came to an iron door. He opened it.

An enormous abyss waited for them there.

A stone staircase attached to the wall on the right descended into a hellish darkness. A thousand steps later, Mephisto's shoes again touched solid ground. At that moment, from some indistinguishable

direction, a wan light welled up.

The faint illumination revealed a world filled with rows of coffins. The gray stone boxes reached out over a hundred wide and deep, and must amount to ten or twenty times that many out of eyesight.

Though none bore a seal or engraving indicating a name or place or date of birth or death, the stone sarcophagi carried about them a sense of dignity and gravitas, proof of the power and knowledge that suffused the dynasties of the ancient world.

“The mausoleums of the Hsia Dynasty were disinterred in place.” Mephisto’s voice rang out inside the startling silence. The heavy lids of the coffins were closed. “I do not understand why, but this should suffice as a resting place for a man of such incomparable beauty.”

He scanned the lines of stone. Several seconds later, he approached a row closer to the staircase and laid his hand on one. The lid of the sarcophagus, that must weigh several hundred pounds, slid off without the slightest resistance and dropped to the ground with an earth-shaking thud.

Mephisto cradled Setsura in his arms and lowered him into the casket. “Rest easy, my fond friend.”

He spoke without sentiment. He gripped the edge of the lid and lifted it easily into the air and placed it back on top of the sarcophagus. The heavy reverberations echoed through the graveyard. His cape fluttering behind him, the white figure climbed back up the long staircase.

Setsura was dead.

Having drunk the elixir prepared by the imposter, he was now entombed within a hundred miles of stone, with no prospect that the light of day would ever fall on his face again.

The imposter climbing the stone steps vanished into the distance. The faint illumination extinguished, an ancient silence filled this underground cavern. Time itself seemed to freeze.

So there was no telling how long it was before a new sound emerged. A thin sound. A faint sound. Fading away and arising again, twining together clear and wet.

The sound of water.

Ears that could make out a single footstep in a throng of people would have heard that sound coming from Setsura's coffin. Eyes that could see in the dark would have seen the thread-like lines spilling from the seams of the sarcophagus.

The unmistakable flow of water.

The black stain grew on the floor below. A groan from within and some indistinguishable form, blacker than the surrounding gloom, slowly but steadily rose up.

The Demon Princess appeared like a star in a night sky.

The air was dank and damp. There was enough light to make out her surroundings. She looked around. She was on a sizable concrete passageway about thirty feet wide. The walls arced over her head to the left. On the right, the passageway dropped off abruptly to form a

drainage culvert ten feet deep and a hundred feet wide.

The walkway and the sloping walls on the far side, the black ribbon of water snaking through the bottom of the culvert, the stinging scent assailing her nostrils—the nature of the place where she found herself was obvious.

These were the haunted remains of Shinjuku's sewer system. Construction had begun three years before the Devil Quake. It was tragically destroyed the very same day it was completed.

Shinjuku had since converted to a new underground water treatment facility. The wrecked portions six hundred feet below the surface were inhabited by creatures and criminals who couldn't stroll about on the surface, who were making it into a second, subterranean Demon City.

Those creatures had definitely been there. And were there now.

Less than ten feet away from her, above the passageway, at the bottom of the culvert, on the piles of rubble, on the rotted, solidified waste that had nowhere else to go—heaps of human bodies lay everywhere.

Even without taking in the prefab houses and tents pitched in the bottom of the culvert, this was clearly a living space. But for the time being, the dark shadows daubing the darkness weren't those inhabitants.

The clothes made some of these men: suits of the latest fashion worn by men in high places, cheaper outfits worn by salesman, caps marked by the logos of taxi services; housewives bearing shopping

bags, security guards, cops, street youths, gangbangers, shop owners, yakuza, the comatose, two-headed freaks, and tourists.

Every member of this menagerie had fangs jutting from their lips, hunger etched on their faces, and eyes crazed with lust.

The white smoke stopped curling up from the Demon Princess. Dropping down six hundred feet from the broken-down access tunnel to the water treatment facility in Yocho, she stripped away her rose garment, leaving her stark naked.

Casting a disparaging glance around her, she grumbled, “To think I would bed down with such vulgar companions? I think not. You find yourselves another place to sleep.”

Her graceful limbs faded into a rapid blur as she spun like a top, kicking up the mud in the tunnel. Every vampire she touched suffered the fate of a dandelion run over by a lawn mower. Heads and hands and feet separated from torsos, some still attached as they whirled around and erupted into the air.

Vampires slept deeply, and death came so instantly that some never raised a sound of complaint. But here and there cries erupted from the ground around her, the result of the demon *qi* radiating from Princess’s body.

“W-What are you doing?”

“Spare us!”

“No way!”

The screams of children mingled with those of men and women

and they were all sucked into the air. Others ran around trying to escape, blood and body parts raining down on their heads. In their fear-filled eyes reflected the kaleidoscopic faces of Princess as she turned and turned.

Every one of her faces was smiling. Not a flicker of anger. Shining with bliss. The love of the massacre. The victims were all her minions, and thus her happiness. This was the dazzling smile of the woman who once forced retainers who criticized their ancient emperors to cling to a red-hot iron bar, and slit open the bellies of pregnant women.

The spinning top of death suddenly ceased. Her pealing laughter rang out. “Hoh! Is anybody there? Any living soul answer me!”

“H-Here—here—”

Several reed-thin voices identified themselves from different directions. No matter what awful fate they might meet, that Princess was their sire was as firm a rule as the physical laws of the universe.

“W-Why—did this happen—to me—?” moaned a young salaryman, his right leg twisted off at the knee.

“Hoh. You are my servants, the bodies you offer up to me are mine to do with as I please. I’ll tell you why; because even asleep you were a bother and a nuisance.”

“T-That’s all—the only reason—to—”

“Of what other use could you possibly be? I didn’t choose you to start with. Useless vermin replicating without meaning. Eradicating you is the only pleasure you will ever bring me.”

“What an—awful—terrifying—person—” said a man. A moment later, similar castigating voices flowed forth.

How would the Demon Princess react to such criticism—she shut her eyes, she writhed. No, this was not chagrin and remorse arising from self-reflection. Her body flushed pink. Her fingers sank into her throat and breasts. Her face shone with ecstasy.

She was elated. She shook with joy. Stealing away life, swimming in blood, and then basking in the deprecations of the suffering propelled her to the heights of rapture.

Her eyes opened. She said in a throaty voice, “Get out of here.”

Knowing they didn’t have the will to disobey, and willing to mete out greater retribution if they did not, without waiting for an answer she descended into the center of the culvert, lay down on her side and promptly fell asleep.

Bearing eyes filled with loathing, the creatures of the night, dumbfounded by such overweening arrogance, did as they were told and scattered deeper into the tunnels wearing wretched expressions on their faces.

A figure in blue blocked the path of one high-placed executive type. After a brief suspicious look, hunger and lust displaced any doubts.

He licked his lips. “What are you doing here, young lady?”

“I came here to observe your sire.” Takako Kanan smiled. “She has done great and terrible things, and has been doing them for so much longer than I. I must unleash all that I am in order to exceed

her.”

“Come here,” said the man, approaching her. He lay a hand on Takako’s shoulder, a hand that looked perfectly normal but felt foul and debased, and pulled her toward him.

“Let’s have a little fun together, what do you say?”

A blue arm pushed the man’s face and his foul breath away. “Alas, you are not a funny man and I am not amused.”

In the next breath, her palm smashed into his face. Her other hand plunged through his chest like a spike and through his quivering heart.

She cocked her head to the side in genuine puzzlement. “So what would be the best way to deliver another knockout punch and send her down for the count? Something that would strike a little fear into the heart of our fair Princess?”

Apparently Takako was a fan of boxing.

Part Twelve: The Akashic Records

Chapter One

Tonbeau Nuvenberg clapped her hands together, hands like a pair of fat lotus flowers. “Are the preparations ready?”

“Yes,” the doll girl answered crisply.

She was in a corner of the forty-by-forty foot room, backing away from a rugged-looking cylinder studded with large rivets. A dynamo.

The brick walls were lined with shelves stacked with medicines and elixirs, guides to the earthly and transcendental realms, atlases of human physiology. Dried plants and roots dangled from the ceiling on cords, along with the antique lighting fixtures. From the lack of windows and the dank claustrophobic atmosphere, they must be in an underground vault.

In the center of the room was a rollaway table. A wooden box was on the table, the item that Mayor Kajiwara brought them.

Tonbeau had tried everything she could think of to break the seal. Now with the help of the doll girl, she was resorting to the last desperate measure she could think of.

Namely—

“Injecting the Akashic Records.”

She pulled down on the rusty lever rising out of the floor. The chains coiled beneath the lever were wrapped around that which her older sister, Galeen Nuvenberg, had sealed away.

Knowing there were no other means, she had swept aside her older sister's magical wards in under an hour. An hour later she was getting ready the means to control the Akashic Records.

The generator gave off a low hum.

By "injection," nothing in fact tied together the wooden box and the outside world. But two pairs of eyes—one filled with avarice, the other with reason—could feel the currents flowing toward the box.

"Do you know when to stop?" the doll girl asked.

"Well."

"Are you intending to inject an infinite amount?"

"If that's what it takes. That loathsome lid is gonna open sooner or later."

"Jealousy and envy are at the root of your being."

"Aw, shut it. Ah, the wind."

The hair of both of them wafted backwards.

"A gentle breeze. A wonderful breeze. These are the currents of the universe."

"The draft circling the repository of the transcript. How many others have felt its touch, I wonder?"

"What in the world?" The doll girl stared at Tonbeau.

"What are you looking at?"

“You have returned to your younger self. You were quite pretty.”

The ruddy cheeks of a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old girl reflected in her blue eyes. Her braided hair hung down to her waist. She was wearing a one-piece dress, pink flowers on white fabric.

“You’re turning into your raw materials too. Ah, don’t look down.”

The doll glanced down at her right hand. Seeing the bright red fluid circulating through glass tubes twined around brass bones, she gasped softly and closed her eyes.

“It seems that our bodies themselves are reading through the records of the past. Any number of wizards, warlocks and my big sister have done the same. The problem is the future.”

“The lid has never been removed in the past, then?”

“Only a very powerful sorcerer could have erected such powerful defenses.”

“With four thousand years of Chinese history at his disposal, Kikiou must have known of the Akashic Records and when they were made.”

“No.” The five-year-old child shook her head. “He wouldn’t have. Neither would have we.”

“When you talk like that, you remind me of my mistress.”

“Thank you,” she said with an unusual gravity. Tonbeau’s voice didn’t come from human vocal cords. It wasn’t even a “voice.” The body projecting it had lost its human form and turned into a lump of

protoplasm. The doll girl herself had reverted to an unformed nothingness.

Despite having lost their forms and all their senses, together with this underground room, their individual existences still clearly remained. They had gone back to the beginning.

"I understand everything. Everything and all at once." There was fear and trembling in the doll girl's "voice."

"You'll forget it all soon enough," Tonbeau answered her. "No one can bear the full knowledge of all there is. And so we make as much of life as we can. Now that we have arrived, expand your consciousness wider. See the future when that box is opened."

"Yes."

What had happened to these two? This was the result of injecting the Akashic Records. The energy spanning all dimensions in the universe stabilized its very structures, and thereby served as a record book upon which the entire history of creation was inscribed.

The entire history. The past and the future. Every and all possible futures. The lid of the box—that had not been opened in eons in this universe—had been opened in an infinite number of others.

Tonbeau Nuvenberg and the doll girl only had to pick one among those infinite others and apply it to the box in this one.

"I have found it." The doll girl's voice echoed from within the distant chaos. "I will now superimpose that reality."

"Take care. Not even my big sister touched these mysteries. A

most serious undertaking. Edgar Cayce read but a smattering, and only enough to heal the sick, and even those skills retrograded to the material levels of this world. Nevertheless, and because of that, he was able to completely fulfill his divine calling."

"We can only pray that the same may be said of us."

"Yeah. Pray on. No, let's get it done!" Tonbeau's "voice" filled with her customary arrogance.

"Here it comes!"

"Go for it!"

Within the shapeless nothingness, something was "chosen."

And in that moment—

The song of a bird wafted through the window. The doctor in white looked down at Takako sleeping on the bed.

They were in a room in the Crystal Pavilion. He was lost in thought. Whatever would he do with this girl? Kikiou had told him to do nothing more in this world. That was all. Had he taken note of the changes occurring inside his own creation?

The pretend Mephisto had camped out at the Crystal Pavilion and there laid a trap for Setsura, which may have been why he returned to his old haunt. But what aroused his attention was that *something* within Doctor Mephisto, the intense desire to cure Takako.

With Takako there before him, Mephisto thought. His memories concerning her were implanted by Kikiou with precision.

As “Doctor Mephisto,” he was equipped with his thoughts and his medical knowledge. When poisoning Setsura, after all, there was the off chance that questions of medicine would occur, questions he should not be hard pressed to answer. His level of knowledge, in fact, equaled that of Kikiou.

“No,” the pretend Mephisto said, shaking his head. “The only treatment for these symptoms is to restore her other self. Doing that would be practically the same as making her a vampire again. But then again—”

As he quietly gazed down at her, a strange expression stole across his face, possessing a demonic air even.

“Setsura Aki exerted all his efforts to save this girl and died as a result. But did he really? Three hundred thousand degrees did not scald him. Perhaps administering an antidote might bring him back to life. That is something I can do.”

Aside from the excessive chattering to himself, this was exactly the line of thought that Doctor Mephisto’s mind would take.

“If Setsura were revived, he would escape with this girl. And all my efforts would be for naught.”

He laced his fingers together in front of his chest in obvious aggravation. Not the kind of thing the Demon Physician would ever do. Had Kikiou wanted the *real* Mephisto, he would have instilled in the copy those peculiarities of thought that identified the individual as a unique and moral agent.

As is, this Mephisto was limited in the extreme, showing those

convincing characteristics only to Setsura. He felt the desire to monopolize Setsura. Anybody else who held similar thoughts must be expunged. That meant dealing with anybody attempting to establish any kind of relationship with Setsura.

The beautiful man glided up to Takako's bedside, the gentleness gone from his features. The shadows from his five fingers fell onto her neck, across which crawled the pairs of teeth marks.

In a flash, the shadows grew darker and thicker, until they were overlaid by the fingers themselves.

"Wait," came a sharp command.

The pretend Mephisto hesitated. The location of the speaker was difficult to identify at first. Then he looked directly above him.

There appeared the face of a young man. Then his shoulders, his chest, his long legs. He was wearing a dark gray three-piece suit. His leather shoes seemed attached to the ceiling. He hung there upside-down like a bat.

"You—are Yakou."

The upside-down young man answered with two, three flaps of the wings folded across his back. "And you are a make-believe Mephisto." The rush of wind wafted the white cape back. "Based on appearances only, the way you walk and talk, you could be his twin. But no. The real doctor would have spied my presence here from the start. Who made you?"

"Sir Kikiou," pretend Mephisto answered at once. He assumed that Kikiou's name would make Yakou think twice and retreat. He

was wrong.

Yakou warmly smiled. “He makes you and you kill Kanan-san—two birds with one stone.”

“What?”

“Princess keeps that girl around to dangle under Setsura’s nose. And so you won’t be touching her, not while I’m around.”

“Bastard. Weren’t you thrown out of here?”

“I was certainly thrown for a loop. From a corner of that forest clear over those distant mountains. Sprained a wing, I think. But I made it back eventually. It’s just been one thing after another ever since I came here.”

The smile didn’t leave his face as a killer vibe welled up from below and pierced Yakou’s entire body.

“And here’s one more. Die in peace.”

He raised his right hand. A light flashed from the tips of his fingers and shot through Yakou’s throat. Yakou glanced down at the steel shaft of the scalpel.

“I was once known as the Elder’s grandson,” he said in a raspy voice. “If you were aware of that, you would have not even thought of killing me in such a fashion. Ah, it’s sad in a way. Make believe has its place, but not here. *This* is the way you throw a shuriken!”

The black streak parted the air. A white veil danced up in front of it. With a single sweep of his cape knocking the shuriken from its murderous trajectory, the pretend Mephisto leapt through the

doorway and into the next room. Another jump and through that room and out the exit, landing a good ten feet from the door. A splendid physical feat, to say the least.

But he had a hand pressed against the left side of his neck. He staggered. A scarlet liquid welled up between his fingers and fell in bloody beads onto his cape.

“Once my shuriken strikes the target, it burrows in until it reaches the other side.”

The pretend Mephisto threw back his head. The shadow was perched on the roof of the Crystal Pavilion like the grim reaper.

“Doctor Mephisto would have done something about it already. But you obviously lack the means. Pray that at least after you die, you share the next world with the real Demon Physician.”

Yakou pushed out his hands in front of him. Before he could discern that this was not a shuriken-throwing motion, a streak of light reached out from Mephisto’s left hand. Halfway along the line tying the two together, it transformed into a bird of prey and launched itself at Yakou’s chest.

A strange sound from below brought that motion to a halt, the sound of a hole a foot in diameter opening in Mephisto’s white torso. Yakou batted aside the wire eagle and gazed down at the fallen Mephisto. He flapped the wings on his back and alit at his feet.

He stood there, hands on hips, and glared at him. “Can you hear me?”

The pretend Mephisto weakly opened his eyes. His life force was

that remarkably strong.

"What I'd expect from any creation of Kikiou's. Stubborn bastard. Before I go looking for everybody else, answer me this—where is Princess?"

Mephisto's lips trembled. "I—do not—know—but—as for Setsura—"

"Hoh. Is he around here someplace?"

"Right—behind you—"

Yakou watched as his head fell back. He whirled around. The picturesquely handsome man stood in the doorway of the Crystal Pavilion. Even eyes accustomed to the sight of Doctor Mephisto's beautiful mien in this warped world became the clouded crystallization of entranced midnight suns.

Chapter Two

"I'm slowing down in my old age. How long have you been standing there?"

"Right after you flew through the window and up to the roof," Setsura said in his always carefree manner.

"And how did you get in?"

"The same back window."

"You were hoping we mutually self-destructed?"

"Works for me." Setsura nodded like a kid hanging out on a street corner with nothing to do. Yakou's killer *qi* wavered just a bit.

"You came here for Kanan-san? I assume you've accomplished that much."

"Sure."

"What happened to Princess?"

"She was playing Marco Polo in a pool when she up and vanished. The outside world, I imagine."

"Kikiou and Mephisto too?"

"Kikiou threw me in the incinerator and took off. He must be doing repairs. I don't know where Mephisto is."

Yakou threw a swaggering laugh back at the languid face. "That

means we can finally get down to business without any outside interference.”

“I guess so.”

Yakou slowly rose to his full height. His wings ruffled, unleashing a gust of wind bearing the intensity of his malice.

The two young men faced each other ten feet apart. The one overflowing with murderous intent, the other as calm as a summer morning. However, the battle would not be resolved by either with such an air.

“Princess says you are not to be killed. But as long as you are around, Princess will surely suffer. You are the one who will.”

Setsura said with a sigh, “Give it a break already.”

“What?”

“First it’s Princess. Then it’s Mephisto. Ryuuki or Kikiou tomorrow? You don’t listen to anybody! A little self-control wouldn’t hurt, you know.”

“Shut up.”

“Naw, I don’t think so.”

“One more word and—”

“—you’ll tell Princess—”

A split second before the wall behind him collapsed, Setsura jumped into the air.

—on me?”

High in the sky, the black slicker abruptly shifted directions and dropped down behind Yakou, who'd unleashed the same *qi* cannon that perforated pretend Mephisto, and was pivoting just as Setsura buried his heel in the back of his head.

He stumbled forward. Breaking his fall with a one-handed push-up, he shot off another burst of *qi* without turning around—a feat only the Elder's grandson could pull off.

He fired purely on instinct. Still in midair, Setsura's stomach disappeared with an audible *pop*. The forest behind him became momentarily visible.

Yakou blinked. No sooner had he shot his *qi* cannon but Setsura's body seemed to waver and grow indistinct. The beautiful black silhouette stood there as if lost in thought. A puzzled expression rose to his face. He slowly fell over like a toppled tree.

"Shit. That hurt." Rubbing the back of his head, Yakou sprang to his feet. He could definitely feel a lump. "You sure don't pull your punches," he complained, though the triumphalism was clear in his voice. He walked over to Setsura with uncertain steps. "Bit of an anticlimax, that. I almost don't want to put an end to it."

"Then don't."

Yakou thrust out his arms in response to the unexpected reply. His arms jerked back as Setsura's left hand plunged into his mouth.

Yakou gagged and coughed. What started out as a hand turned into a fluid inside his mouth and poured into his windpipe and lungs.

“Son of a bitch!” he tried to shout, but he swallowed Setsura’s whole hand into his lungs. Yakou’s consciousness rapidly dimmed. In the middle of a sun-drenched field, the vampire prince in the dark suit was drowning.

Nevertheless, no doubt thanks to the true power of that pedigree, he mustered his strength and pushed his arms against Setsura’s stomach.

Setsura’s torso tore in two, blowing backwards, taking clothing and flesh and torn threads with it. Then it erupted, like drops of water returning to the puddle they’d splashed from.

“I’m half water right now,” the wavering face said in an utterly blasé manner.

Considering what had just happened, it was a hell of a thing to say. The pretend Mephisto’s “treatments,” diluted, caused no lasting harm. It was easier to allow himself to get laid out flat and return to rescue Takako than stand his ground and duke it out.

He’d heard Kikiou’s instruction to leave her there. That he chose to remain silent, offering no resistance while being tossed into the incinerator was a lot harder to comprehend. The reason being that he was curious to see what happened would startle not only Kikiou, but Princess as well.

“Vampires can definitely drown in water. That won’t kill them, but it will knock them out. When you come to, be a good boy and forget all about that bad-tempered lady.”

Yakou heard none of this as the energy drained out of him.

Unable to support himself with his free hand, Setsura planted his right hand against Yakou's stomach. Normal solidity immediately returned to his face and body.

Despite returning to a "normal" state, he couldn't, in a flash, avoid the situation that followed perhaps because he was still half water.

A grimace crossed his face. He whirled around. Yakou collapsed. Enormous claws dug into his back, the claws of a giant eagle made out of wire.

Setsura staggered. In front of him appeared a white wax-like face. A hand reached up from the grass. Even without seeing the wires clenched between his fingers, the actions of the pretend Mephisto could be easily deciphered.

"*Born into this world—for a mere two hours—*" The pale lips breathed in the air of the River Styx. "*But—I regret—nothing—if I can die—with you. Let us go Setsura. Together. To that—other world. As a present—that man too—*"

The trembling hands formed the wires into a stake.

"Knock it off," Setsura said, and threw his head backward. The bird on his back thumped its beak at the back of his skull.

Exercising his will alone, Setsura forced his more human attributes to take precedence over his liquid state. A moment later, invisible wires cut the bird into pieces. At the same time, the stake flew from pretend Mephisto's hand. The white doctor's head exploded.

Blood and brains scattered in a mist, falling in a red rain on the prone Setsura. He shouldered the pain and tried to turn back into liquid form, but the shock from the bird's attack upset the control of his facilities, and he remained as he was.

Instead, somebody pressed a hand against the back of his head. "That was one of Kikiou's inventions," Yakou said, choking on his indignation as much as the water in his lungs. "Disobey him and die. The kind of thing he would do. Thanks to him, the situation has now reversed itself. In memory of the make-believe Mephisto, I shall now send you to the same place. Goodbye and farewell."

Brilliant lines ran toward Yakou's body, but every one of them was repelled by his unbelievable power.

"Can you turn back into water, Setsura?"

"Well—"

A moment later—

"Did it!"

Tonbeau's "voice" pressed against the chaos and confusion. The desired end had been achieved.

"The lid is open. Something came out!"

"Close it!" said the doll girl.

"Not yet!"

"If the dimensions superimpose themselves any more, the distortions will reach into this time and space. We may truly evaporate into nothingness."

“Hmm,” grumbled Tonbeau, but quickly made up her mind. “Can’t have that. Close it!”

“Yes!”

Tonbeau glanced at the doll girl, situated next to the generator. The room was perfectly normal. The box sat undisturbed on the table. The lid was closed. The only difference were the two bodies lying on the ground next to the table.

The startled doll girl stared. “Setsura-san!” She ran over to him. “Setsura-san! And Yakou-san too!”

“Move it.”

Tonbeau shoved the doll girl out of the way, took the pulses of Setsura and Yakou, and peered down at them. “They both seem alive. Aki is badly injured. We’d better treat him pronto.”

The two picked the men up and laid them down in two beds. Going over to the shelves of medicines, Tonbeau looked around. “The lid opened and these two popped out. There should be a lot more where they came from. The Akashic Records must make its own choices.”

“Perhaps there is somebody in charge, somebody keeping the records,” said the doll girl, gazing down at Setsura’s face. “And they chose these two. This must be for the good of the universe, as it watches and remembers.”

“Huh. Nothing but speculation.”

Tonbeau returned holding a green bottle. The viscous liquid

scooped up by her caterpillar-like fingers was the same color as the glass. She daubed it on Setsura's wounds. Then she stopped.

"What's wrong?"

"Something's wrong. This young man isn't normal."

"Eh?"

"The feel of his skin is strange. It's water. Go ahead, see for yourself."

Looking a bit abashed, she touched Setsura's cheek. She turned to Tonbeau. "You are correct. He has all the symptoms of an aquaman."

"Exactly. The man is half water."

No less impressive were the witch and the doll girl, who could discern such a thing from a single touch. Tonbeau laid a hand on Yakou.

"This one's all right. But he is under some sort of strange spell."

Again, she had diagnosed him in the snap of a finger.

"What kind of spell?"

"He has been deprived of his will at a very high level."

"How could Setsura have ended up in such a state?"

"Probably this chap here."

A fierce rage rose to the doll girl's eyes, and then faded away. "Shall we heal them both?"

“Yeah, but it’ll take some time.” Tonbeau nodded, then smiled.

“Ah, that face.”

“What? Don’t look at me like that. Healing people around here is a fee-for-service business, isn’t it?”

“Yes, when it comes to normal doctoring.”

“And you’re saying I’m different.”

“Well—”

“C’mon, spit it out.”

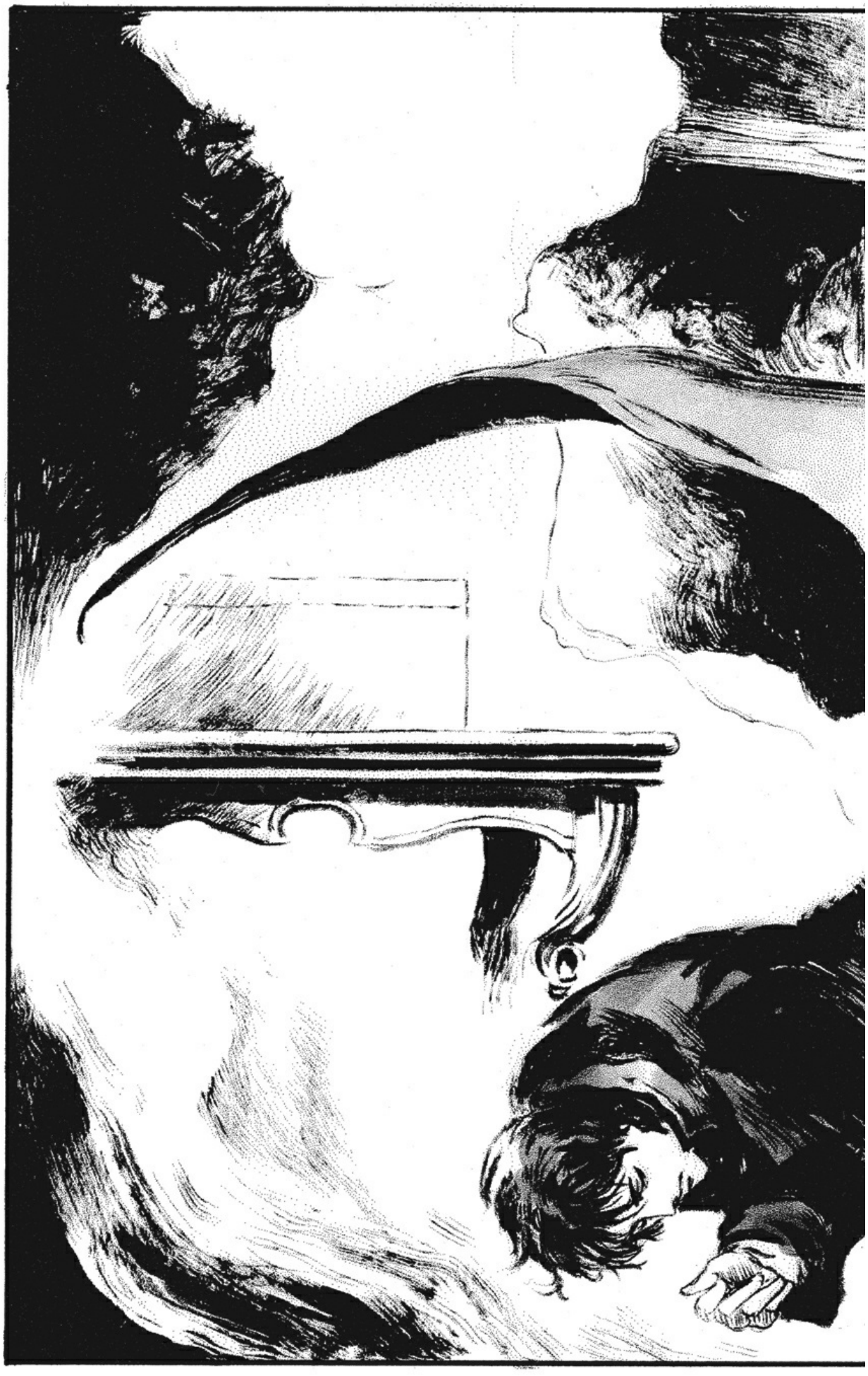
“Well—”

“What?”

“Compared to the average doctor, Tonbeau-sama has something of a perverse bedside manner.”

“What of it?”

“You don’t intend to charge Setsura-sama for healing him, do you?”



Caught in the gaze of her clear eyes, Tonbeau cringed a bit and retreated. There was something so *human* about that look. “Who do you think I was thinking of?”

“You were thinking of the mayor, perhaps?”

“Hmm.”

“You cannot be serious. In the first place, the mayor would have no reason to.”

“That doesn’t follow,” Tonbeau said, raising a sudden objection. “The mayor brought that box to us, and would obviously be expected to take responsibility for whatever came out of it. Moreover, young master Setsura here is working on behalf of the city. It would only make sense for the mayor to also take responsibility for any injuries that might befall him. Wouldn’t it? Wouldn’t it?”

Tonbeau pushed out her chest, intending to intimidate the doll girl with her ample bust and belly.

However soft her voice, she was not cowed in the least. “You should not take the mayor for granted. He is considered one of the most able mayors since the founding of Demon City for good reason.”

“We’ll know soon enough. Time to swing into action.” She plucked at both their cheeks for some reason or another. A moment later, the fat lady’s eyes narrowed. “What’s that?” she exclaimed.

The doll girl looked on impassively. The Czech Republic’s

second greatest witch—and she clearly deserved the honor—must have detected something her supernatural senses couldn't.

"I'm going upstairs," Tonbeau said, heading for the door.

"Um—"

"You stay here and watch over them."

"Tonbeau-sama," said the doll girl, no differently than before, but with an extra degree of resolve in her voice. "A fearsome enemy, perhaps?"

"Perhaps. Interesting. I'm not so nice a person as my big sister, you see. Hold on, and I'll soon enough turn 'em to dust."

"I'm coming too."

"What are you saying? You doubt my powers?"

"No, human nature."

Tonbeau glared at her. The doll girl said without reserve, in her quiet manner, "You wouldn't be planning on running away?"

"Nonsense! I'm just looking for a good hiding place."

"I'll come with," the doll girl said with a sigh—or what would pass for a sigh in her case. "This is the house of your big sister, Galeen Nuvenberg. No matter who he might be, no one may set foot in it without being invited. Tonbeau-sama may hide herself in whatever place suits her. Leave the rest to me."

The fat lady shifted back and forth. "Really?" she said.

"Yes."

“Then I will stay here and treat these two.”

“Here is to your health.”

“Annoying brat. Shoo. Be on your way.”

“If you would excuse me,” the doll girl said with a little curtsey, and turned to the door without the slightest sign of concern.

After passing down the hallway—a wonder that Tonbeau could even fit between its narrow walls—and scaling a flight of stone stairs and turning down another corridor, she emerged into the living room.

The light slanting through the windows was at last strong enough to be called sunlight. After taking a single breath with her small lungs, woven from the finest down, and letting it out, the doll girl patted the dust off her dress.

And paused. The door was right in front of her.

Chapter Three

The old man standing in the entranceway to the Nuvenberg residence was wearing a long gray robe.

"What a bother," he said, stroking his long, wizardly white beard and hobbling up to the door with his twisted staff.

This was Kikiou, who had come here after leaving Setsura in the care of pretend Mephisto.

"Thanks to that dimensional vortex, the nexi are all scrambled and confused. But I wouldn't have imagined finding myself at the Nuvenberg house in order to retrieve it. This is fate at work."

Tendrils of indescribable evil twined about the one-story house and the great warlock. Princess had disposed of Galeen Nuvenberg, and yet the magical miasma surrounding it, though disheveled, was hardly weak. Kikiou could only conclude that a force no less powerful had stepped into her shoes.

"The only way in is to put that force to the test."

He pushed out the fist holding the staff in front of him. A buzzing sound came from within his robes. With a sound like a muffled gong, the door bent inward.

"So force alone is not enough, eh? In that case—"

He pointed the end of his staff at the door. A moment later came the sound of the latch unlocking. Without pushing or pulling, the

door opened. Kikiou started to stroll through the threshold. He stopped.

In the dim light, light that filtered through ancient ruins, a head of golden hair bobbed in a bow. “How nice to see you, Kikiou-sama.”

“This is the first time we’ve met. Are you the creation of Galeen Nuvenberg?”

“Yes.”

“And a beautiful voice to match. I should have expected nothing less.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Anyway, something that belongs to me is in this house. Would you be so kind as to fetch it for me?”

“Well.”

Kikiou flashed a gentle smile utterly at odds with the character of the man familiar to anybody else who knew him.

“My mistress isn’t in presently. I will be sure to let her know that you dropped by.”

“That will not do, as I am in a hurry. I shall go look for it myself.”

“I’m afraid I cannot allow that,” the doll girl said crisply. “It is not within my purview to allow anybody in at this time.”

“So you are refusing me entrance?”

“I’m sorry, but you may not enter.”

“Hmm.”

Kikiou cast his eyes down like a doctor whose patient had just inquired about the incurable disease afflicting him. The end of the staff snapped up. But it was Kikiou who gulped in surprise. On the tip of the staff, from which the murderous aura gushed forth, stood a small girl.

Just before the staff could shoot out its *qi* in all directions, the doll girl sprang at his face. The way she pursed her lips could hardly be in deference to the memory of Galeen Nuvenberg.

She blew a stream of purple mist at Kikiou’s face. Kikiou coughed. His skin turned an ashen color. The doll girl had spit out enough poison to kill an elephant on the spot.

Kikiou staggered, planted the staff vertically on the ground and clung to it. The doll girl perched on the top of the staff and looked down at him impassively. Kikiou fell forward right outside the door.

At the same time, an invisible bolt of energy released from the staff. The doll girl flew into the air. She struck the ceiling above the entranceway and fell to the ground, the joints of all four limbs shattered.

The blue eyes calmly watched as Kikiou got to his feet. The mechanical pounding in his chest increased in pitch and magnitude.

“For one bearing such a cute face, you do carry on in such a frightening manner.”

The complexion recovered its original tone. Kikiou smiled. It was a surprisingly sad expression. This old man had mercilessly slaughtered thousands, but the blood of a scientist ran through what passed for his veins, and he could not but empathize with the creation of a mind equal to his.

"I have also breathed the breath of life into a doll, and a soul also. But they all went mad. Or crashed. Meeting you has given me a whole new respect for Galeen Nuvenberg."

He raised the hand holding the staff. "I flushed the poison from my system using the power of my *qi*. Any repairs would be impossible without it. Rather than exposing your body to an ignoble death, I shall grant you an end most befitting your splendid construction."

Kikiou raised the staff high into the air. The unfathomable energy vanished into emptiness and a fierce wind flung him back to the street. His long robes moaned. In midair, he waved the staff. The wind stopped.

The great wizard set down on the path and peered at the rectangular opening in the doorway. A shadow bulged out of it like a big bubble. Kikiou expected the jamb to break when it popped out of the opening. He couldn't help taking a step back.

The beer barrel-sized silhouette glanced down at the doll girl, then glared at Kikiou. She rubbed her hands, like slapping two sides of beef together.

"You sure showed this little girl a thing or two, huh? Killing my big sister don't mean Nuvenberg blood is on the buffet just yet. The

sun may have set, but the moon still rises. I couldn't tell you what four thousand years of Chinese whatever amounts to, but this time it's you and me, buddy."

She noisily cleared her throat. At some point, she'd had a drink or two. The fat lady wiping her thick lips with a hand like a catcher's mitt was none other than the witch Tonbeau Nuvenberg.

Kikiou's eyes flared with hostilities, but then softened. "Your legs are shaking, little sister of the great witch."

"Big deal. They're shaking with excitement."

"You've had that habit since I met you."

"Eh?" she said, her eyes opening a little wider.

"You probably do not remember. You were two at the time. A porcine runt of a tomboy who in no way resembled her wiser older sister. As I recall, she had a bowl of beef for every meal."

Tonbeau's face flushed blue and red like a neon sign. "People who like to embarrass others in public don't deserve to live!"

"A tomboy, but really a coward who can't sally into a fight without alcoholic reinforcement. I can smell the cheap wine from here. You have got a long way to go to fill Galeen Nuvenberg's shoes."

"Shut up," Tonbeau fired back.

"But on to more important matters. Fragments of the Akashic Records are wafting about this place. What did you do with it? Did you open *it*?"

“I did indeed,” Tonbeau answered with an evil smile.

“What happened? Did something come out?”

“Make that two somethings.”

“Two? Who?”

“Setsura and Yakou. My ally has returned. That sure turns the volume up a notch, eh?”

“Only them? That means that Takako—”

“An opening!”

Tonbeau jumped into the air. She landed a moment later in the same place with a loud thump. At first glance, it seemed the fat lady was pitching a fit. But the earth quaked. The house rattled and shook. So did Kikiou.

The startled warlock jumped backward. He knew that Tonbeau was up to something, but was a little slow off the mark. He felt the vibrations rattling up from the ground and through the bottom of his feet. He stuck the landing, but couldn’t stop shaking. Only Kikiou was shaking.

This was no sleight of hand. The great warlock’s body was practically a blur.

“How’s them magical apples for you? Let the vibrations my weight sets off reach even your fingertip and there’s no escaping it.” The fat red face laughed in an evil screech. “Off goes your nose, out comes your eyes and your teeth. The flesh sloughs off, the nerves fray like worn yarn. Last of all, your bones disintegrate. Dust to

dust. I can make it last fifty, a hundred years if I'm in the mood. But you'll fly apart here on the spot."

The earth rumbled again. Tonbeau sank low to the ground. Kikiou couldn't retreat. His outlines grew more and more indistinct.

Then, "Huh?"

Tonbeau pinched her brows together. The faint blur of motion that Kikiou had become was stained with a kind of color. In the blink of an eye, he regained his true shape and form. Tonbeau Nuvenberg heard the rustle of his long robes.

"If motion is your lock, then revolution is the key." Kikiou stroked his white beard. The mannerisms of a good-natured old man cloaked an indomitable will that cast even the sunlight into shadow.

Tonbeau watched as he stretched out his staff.

Clenching her fingers hard enough to break and casting out a defensive perimeter, she crossed her arms before her eyes.

It came at her and lifted up her massive body. Translated into physical form, Kikiou's *qi* struck with a force of ten tons per square inch.

The Czech Republic's second greatest witch shot through the door, through the front foyer, and stopped at the back of the hallway only because she was caught between the narrowing stone wall.

In a flash, a second attack came at her. Her shoulders were pinned by the wall. She was caught point-blank.

Her body swelled up like a bowling ball dropped into a big bowl

of raw dough. Rebounding to its original form, her puffy tear-stained face unleashed a scream.

"Hoh," said the old man. "Even that didn't kill you." His silhouette filled the doorway. "Although you cannot demonstrate it, this house is telling me your true abilities lack nothing compared to your older sister. I may have taken you for granted. Well, then. Let us take off the gloves."

"W-W-W-Wait a second—" Tonbeau struggled and writhed. In her frantic consternation, she couldn't say anything more than, "Whoa! Time out! Time out!"

She stuck her right hand into the pocket of her shirt, and pulled out a wine bottle, somehow hiding it from view. Kikiou did his best to not watch as her sausage-like lips swallowed the neck of the bottle. This weekend warrior of a witch was hardly worth the worry.

Tonbeau belched. Either she had a hollow leg or couldn't hold her liquor, but the rosy tint returned to her cheeks. She brandished the bottle around her belly.

"Go get 'em!" she cried.

"Die," Kikiou replied.

He unleashed a fusillade of *qi*. The bottle leapt from her hand, seized the burst of invisible power and broke it to bits. Kikiou surely cursed his pride in that moment. Now it came back at him, his *qi* and whatever forces were sealed inside the bottle.

His senses went numb as he was again blown back down the walk. He didn't land gracefully but sprawled across the ground.

Tonbeau Nuvenberg was no longer a two-year-old brat of a tomboy.

"Fucked up again," the great warlock grumbled to himself as he hurried toward Waseda Boulevard, dragging one leg. "But as long as the pathways are connected, no matter where it ends up, I'll know where that box is. It will not be long until we meet again."

Kikiou was already hard at work scheming up his next plan.

It took Tonbeau ten minutes to work herself free. She'd taken two fusillades of Kikiou's *qi*. That was how long it took to recover her physical strength.

She had carried the doll girl to her special room and was laying her out on the workbench when there came the flapping of black wings.

The big raven peered down from the ceiling. "What's up?"

"You can see what's up. Where have you been goofing off until now? You stumble across any information worth anything at all, and you're supposed to bring it to me right away."

"I don't know how much it's worth, but I did find one amazing woman."

Tonbeau and the doll girl exchanged looks.

"No, not *her*. I'm talking about Takako Kanan."

"Eh?"

The doll girl's eyes peeled as wide as physically possible—for she couldn't move any other part of her body. "Where is she?"

“Hanging out near some gang’s crib near Yocho. Hard to tell if it’s really her, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“She set the whole place on fire and then picked off every last one of them as they ran for their lives.”

The figure of the black bird reflected in their eyes like an angel of death.

Part Thirteen: Dragon and Tiger Time

Chapter One

Since that morning, the Shinjuku Police Department had been worked ragged by two separate incidents.

The first had the mayor telling his undercover agents, “A leader of the vampires is holed up in a fissure in the earth near Yocho. Take a hundred of your best men and eliminate her.”

The police chief wanted to know where he got his information. All he would say was, “A private communication from one of our citizens.”

They were provisioned with two hundred peaches and stakes from the city warehouse. Five minutes before they were scheduled to depart, an emergency report came in from a Yocho police box.

“We’ve got a raging fire and a rampaging killer on our hands here.”

So far, nobody had put the two incidents together and concluded that the mayor’s information and the rampaging killer shared the same source.

The special unit that had been assembled split into two and rushed to the scene. The results were as pitiful as they were violent.

Entering the earth through the fissure, the police unit came across a strikingly beautiful woman in a huge sewer conduit deep underground. She was naked and sound asleep.

These men were not from the Toyama housing project. The sight of her lascivious body stole away their souls along with their reason. They cast aside their stakes and leaned over her body. Steeped in her bloody dreams, her body reacted. Not one of them emerged after that to tell what happened next.

The gangster's crib was a more straightforward affair. The territory in question involved an entire city block consisting of the headquarters and three or four houses adjacent to it, and ten to twenty more bars, strip clubs and loan sharking establishments that operated under its "protection." The gang itself didn't come to more than three hundred members.

It was one of hundreds of such "associations" located in Shinjuku.

And it was consumed in flames.

The fire department started extinguishing the fire. They and the SDF reservists, whose goals up to this point seemed unrelated, found themselves confronted by both the hair-raising murderer and the extent of the destruction.

The streets were engulfed in smoke and flames. The conflagration was so fierce that only one passable road remained. All the houses appeared to have been torched simultaneously. The flash points ran from the bottom floors to the roofs like lightning strikes in reverse.

The residents had jumped from the windows and ran up the one safe street. In this part of town, they were naturally all packing heat of their own.

Reaching a safe distance, the smoke and embers whirling into the air above them, they encountered a blue lady standing there. The bands of lights whirling about her body shot through the escaping gangsters, wrapping them in flames the same color.

“What the fuck are you doing, lady?”

Her merciless smile froze them in their tracks. Their guns spat fire. Lasers and RPGs rushed at her.

In the midst of an inferno more violent than the bonfires behind them, the lady grew all the more blue and transparent. Her laughter wafted on the winds, laughter from the depths of her heart, aroused by unbearable pleasures.

Witnessing the kind of being behind this massacre, the rescuers hung back. Every time the blue light spilled out, the blazing buildings flared and expanded in different shapes and colors.

“What are you doing, Princess?” she cried out. “I will burn down this city while you sleep. Yo, firefighters! Hurry up and fight these fires. I’ll light you some more and keep you busy as bees. Ah, the life of a killer is so much *fun*.”

Here was the strange sight of a merciless murderer murdering alongside firefighters fighting fires.

The police weren’t just going to stand idly by. They drew their weapons and ordered her to stop and fired warning shots. When all came to naught, a few of them tried to tackle her, but passed right through her body.

The firefighters directed their hoses at the flames scorching the

sky. Beside them danced a woman slaughtering one victim after the next. Beside *them*, security agents crashed into the ground like acrobatic clowns. Tragedy turned into a comedy and the comedy became a farce.

There was finally nobody left to run away. The blue Takako turned to the police officers and firefighters. The feared and respected Shinjuku Demon Hunting Squad hadn't yet arrived.

Something descended from the sky.

Setsura Aki landed on the ground with only slightly bent knees, and quickly straightened. Tonbeau Nuvenberg landed with a thump on her ass. "Ow, ow, ow!" she yelped, not immediately getting up.

"Oh, it's Setsura-san!" Takako called out. "Did you come here to get in my way? You and your fat auntie?"

"That I did," Setsura answer airily. "I would have taken you back myself, but you are the *other* Kanan-san, so my fat aunt is here to watch my back."

Tonbeau got to her feet, brushing off her bum and puffing alcoholic fumes. "Young people these days don't respect their elders. Who extricated herself from that tight fix? Who figured out where she was? Thanks to a little magical *Weight Watchers*, I dropped fifty pounds too."

She belched.

"Sorry about that," Setsura apologized, not taking his eyes off Takako.

He found out about Takako from Tonbeau and the big raven. Rather than hailing a taxi, he'd made his way there with his devil wires. But no matter how great a genie he might be, he didn't have a way of capturing her without killing her. Not to mention that killing her was pretty much impossible too.

How could he kill this demonic sprite, that he couldn't even touch?

"Sorry, but I won't be going with you," Takako said.

"Why?" asked Setsura.

"I haven't done enough killing yet. Doing away with all those weaker things feels *so* good. I can accept it in a way I never could before. I have at last become the real me."

Setsura listened without response, taking in the alter-ego of this girl he was trying to save and her inhuman confessions. Passing through the shadow of death, the shadows falling upon his frazzled face were a darker shade than mere weariness.

This was not Takako. And yet it was Takako. The girl sleeping peacefully in the back of the Crystal Pavilion was Takako. The girl who could slay hundreds and then calmly complain she was just getting started was Takako too.

What had Mephisto created in his effort to rescue Takako before she turned fully into a vampire?

"Perhaps you were better off as a vampire." There was hardly a *perhaps* about it now. "But we'll take you with us."

“And if I say no?” Takako said, raising a hand to her mouth and smirking. “Get in my way and I’ll kill you, and a dozen more like you. Once I have reduced the population of Demon City to zero, I’ll think about it.”

The blue light grazed across Setsura’s face and struck a patrol car behind him. The hood flew open, disgorging a ball of flame and wrapping a fiery blanket of oily fire around the police officers.

Setsura flicked his right hand. The micron-thin titanium scythe severed Takako’s willowy waist in two. He felt nothing more than the wires parting thin air.

“Oh, you got me,” Takako said with a mischievous glare. “But it won’t come cheap. I may just have to tease you to death.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Setsura said with a shrug, a sign he was out of ideas on his end.

The blue light leapt out and struck at Setsura’s chest. In the moment before contact, it changed into a rainbow of colors and spread out in ripples. The ripples overlapped and merged, casting out shadows of light and dark around him.

“Much appreciated,” said Setsura.

Tonbeau cheeks flushed. “Ah, well, it can’t be helped, I guess. Youngsters these days may be uncouth, but they are comely. A kiss as a reward? Oh! What was I thinking?”

“On the lips?” Takako said disbelievingly.

“You’re darn tootin’!”

“On the cheek,” corrected Setsura, a tad bit peeved. “On the cheek.”

“Fine. I’ll burn you to a crisp but leave your filthy lips behind.”

Tonbeau stifled a belch. “Let’s get this straight, girlie. You are a doppelganger. You’re not the first, and you won’t be the last. Though I can’t remember one ever being as bitchy as you. There are ways. We have means.”

“Then let us see what you have to offer before I dispatch you for good.”

Blue stained the world. With Takako encased at its center, the sapphire snake slithered down the road. Every time the glowing torso struck the surface, black smoke erupted from the asphalt. The trail carved into the blacktop and the light it cast off made mincemeat of obstacles.

Amidst the shouts and screams of the police officers drifted incantations in the Czech tongue. “In the name of the four great elements, I summon you. Water that scatters light, wind that binds what cannot be touched. Come! *Urp*.”

The sun dimmed.

Water gushed up like a fountain from the tracks gouged by the snake, forming a barrier in front of the raging light. The light was sucked into the water. At the same time, a strangled cry rose from Takako’s throat. A gust of wind tangled about the body that her alter-ego, that nothing else could touch.

A similar “Hand of the Wind” was said to infuse the magical arts

perfected by Christian Rosenkreuz.

“Come here!”

Tonbeau beckoned with her hand. However Takako tried to flee, a stronger power restrained her. Twirling around like a ballerina, she was drawn into the witch’s arms.

“She’s a strong one all right. Wrap the both of us with those threads of yours.” Tonbeau felt the punishing binding twining around them. “You can let the mayor know what’s going on later. First, get me back home as quickly as possible!”

“Roger that,” a voice drawled from within the black smoke. The beer-barrel sized lady and the willowy girl, embracing like mother and child, flew high into the air.

The officers and firefighters who’d escaped a fiery death thought they might have recognized a man in black on the roof of a nearby building, but then a moment later, the oily blast from an exploding patrol car erased the three otherworldly beings from view.

That day at least, probably the ones most shaken by events were those three. When they arrived safely back at the house a dozen minutes later, the box wasn’t there. In the full light of day, someone had strolled into the great magician’s house and borne it away.

“What is this!” Tonbeau raged. Setsura looked on blankly.

Tonbeau was still locked in an embrace with Takako. Thanks to the “wind” element, the hair of the two had stood on end, blown back, then tangled together.

“One would think that common thieves would at least give a house bearing the name of Nuvenberg a pass!”

As it turned out, an eyewitness was present, the doll girl lying on a bed in the back. “The mayor came by,” she explained in a soft but firm voice.

“He what? Didn’t you think that a bit strange? What did he say? That the prime minister wanted a gander at it too? Or else—”

“Did he say he wanted Doctor Mephisto to take a look at it?” suggested Setsura.

“No. His wife. She wanted to show it off to her friends at an upcoming Welfare Society fundraiser.”

“You don’t say.” Tonbeau’s shoulders slumped. “And I could believe it.”

“So could I,” Setsura agreed. He went to the living room and made a phone call.

“I haven’t left the office since coming to work this morning!” the mayor barked. “At any rate, I want to hear what’s going on. Get over here as soon as you can!”

The prime minister had managed to call off the American nuclear missile strike. But this business of him sporting Setsura’s face and everything else—mysteries piled on top of mysteries.

“I’ll explain everything later,” Setsura said.

The mayor insisted he could come over right then, but Setsura politely declined and ended the call.

“I’m afraid you were taken for a ride,” he said gently. The doll girl hung her head. Setsura scratched his head in a damn-it-all manner and said to the trussed up Tonbeau and Takako, “The mayor says that a girl came to him with information about Princess’s current hiding place. The door didn’t budge coming in or going out, and his secretary noticed nothing amiss. Was that you?”

“Hmm?” Takako smiled seductively.

“Why would you do something like that?”

“I detest women who carry on so high and mighty. If you want me to explain more, hurry up and tell this lump of pork to let go of me.”

“What’s this? I’ll teach you to respect your elders, young lady.”

She squeezed her hamhock pair of arms. Takako screamed. The whirlwind whipped at their hair and clothes.

“Tonbeau-san,” Setsura said, looking out the window, “I’m going to search for Princess. It might be possible to put an end to this during the day. Ten thousand police officers and more wouldn’t make a bit of difference.”

“I’ll leave you to it. Vampires give me the willies.”

“I figured as much. You’ve been a great help. I’ll leave Takako Kanan-san in your care.”

“Don’t dawdle. If you’re not back quick, I’m throwing in the towel once and for all. What happens next to this city, I couldn’t care less. How long do I keep holding onto this tart?”

He asked Takako, “And what will you do if left to your own

devices?”

“Only the dead know.”

“Damned quack,” Setsura grumbled to himself. The sculpturesque face of a doctor and the wan countenance of a girl grazed his thoughts, the body of Takako Kanan left behind in the back of the Crystal Pavilion.

He’d have to get everybody back where they belonged eventually. But a more pressing matter awaited him right now.

How would this genie slay the Demon Princess slumbering deep within the earth?

Chapter Two

Setsura stopped before the fissure in Yocho.

It was a little over a dozen feet wide and a yard across at its widest point. Of the hundreds of such chasms and crevasses scattered across Shinjuku, this one was on the small side. Even children knew to avoid them. The stakes and cyclone fences were there to keep the silly sightseers from doing silly things and injuring themselves.

Although they were all generally referred to as “fissures,” they came in a myriad of types and sizes. The one in Ushigome-Yanagi was covered and surrounded by three layers of fifty-thousand-volt electric fencing. On nights when a bright moon rose high, creatures of unknown origins emerged while others recklessly threw themselves in.

The hole in Bentencho was a tad more “real.” Three times a day, at eight o’clock in the morning, noon, and seven in the evening, a single SDF soldier arrived, tossed in a hand grenade, waited for the explosion, and left. As far as anybody knew, nothing had changed about that hole, and the SDF wasn’t testing hand grenade designs.

Whatever was lurking down there demanded caution. The drivers of the vehicles parked around the vacant lot reported that nobody had returned. That they hadn’t hardly surprised him. That responsibility fell on the shoulders of the mayor. However shrewd a man he might be, he couldn’t comprehend Princess’s bottomless

powers.

But the real reason Setsura came to a halt was that—something was there. He looked around. It was ten o'clock in the morning. The summer sun poured down, as if trying to reduce everything to a melting pool of white.

The vacant lot was approximately a hundred feet on a side. The buildings that once stood there had been leveled, and now only broken-down ten foot walls on the east and south sides remained.

Setsura's gaze focused on the top of the south wall. Nothing was there. His devil wires jumped out and scanned the surface of the wall, and detected a warm spot, not the heat of the sun but left by something with a body, that had been there a short time before.

A golden scale about four inches long and two inches wide. The edges of the scale were dark green. Off the top of his head, he couldn't think of any creature it might belong to.

He spun around, sensing the raw breath of a wild thing in the vicinity of his waist. Nothing was there.

Gripping the devil wires cast out to the wall, Setsura approached the fissure. Anything after him should still be on his tail. And when it came at him, he'd be better off knowing what he was fighting.

He jumped over the chain-link fence, didn't land, but fell down into the chasm. His slicker puffed open in the up-rushing wind as he descended like a black dahlia into this literal underworld.

All around him glowed green eyes. His ears rang with the sickening cries and growls. These were the creatures incrusted into

the walls of earth on all sides.

Three hundred feet down he reduced the velocity of his descent and dropped silently to solid ground. He'd scanned the ground with a separate devil wire for a safe place to land. The area was lit up by sunlight spilling from the fissure far above and a faint glow from the water conduits.

Bioluminescent bugs flourished in the stone walls and layers of mud. The faint pink light cast Setsura into the silhouette of a man born into a demon world and left with no place else to turn.

But this silhouette had places to go and things to do before calling it a day.

The ground stretching out from the crushed sewers was covered with footprints. The men had shot down the escape tubes currently stacked up on the trucks, which then automatically recoiled when no longer in use—one of the "secret weapons" used by special tactical units.

A strange sound reached Setsura's ears a short time later—call it the moans and groans of those imprisoned forever in the darkness of this subterranean labyrinth.

Though if it was a prison, then the cells must be furnished with torture chambers stocked with the sweetest kind of punishments.

He abruptly came across a group of men writhing on the ground. They were dressed in civilian clothes, though in a reflection of the pathos of the government man in the gray flannel suit, all were dressed the same. Here were the missing law enforcement personnel.

Stealing closer through the shadows, Setsura got a better look at their faces. Their bloodshot eyes, devoid of reason and human sentiment, were filled with the least evolved of animal desires, faces etched with carnality and depravity, as if they had been possessed by erotic spirits.

That woman, he thought.

The men shifted forward, forming a large ring. The moaning died away. The movement stopped. Sensuous cries again welled up from a point at the top of the ring. Setsura's eyes were drawn to the source. The body of a woman, skin like cream, could be glimpsed beneath the dark heap of men—her thighs, her arms, her face.

As if feasting on her discarded body parts, the hands and legs and lips of the men swarmed over her. Hands massaged her breasts, lips sucked at her nipples and dove down between her legs to eat her out.

Every time a hand moved, another replaced it. Her face was wet with saliva, as if set upon by slathering dogs, their panting lips covering those the color of red coral.

The voices were all those of the men.

Not just the man whose waist shuddered between her thighs, but all those lusting after her flesh. Those reduced to simply watching had whipped it out and were engrossed in getting off. Simply watching would make a man come in passing.

In that moment, urged on by her lascivious nature, or else commanded by the baser instincts to defile her, they spread their seed onto her face and breasts and belly, while she smeared the

semen across her body with her porcelain white hands.

"And in broad daylight," Setsura said with a wry smile. "Attagirl."

Over and over again they would surely have continued this frantic coupling. Having shot their wads, the men stepped back from her, more dead than alive. In their place, more men lined up to unburden themselves on her, the faces etched with exhaustion and fatigue—

—while the Demon Princess took everything they had to give her without so much as a peep, bathed in the bawdy bodily fluids, her loins glistening, the tentacles of lust erupting all around her like the silk of a black widow spider, consuming the souls of her mates before consuming them.

At this rate, they would desiccate and turn into mummies and die. And even dead, would continue to sexually service her.

With more wordless cries and intolerable groans, the men next in line spent themselves.

Setsura's thoughts lit up with the spark of a possibility. However immortal a body Princess might possess, perhaps at the center she yet preserved a core of very human attributes. Experiencing the heights of pleasure also implied the ability to feel the depths of pain.

He flung out his devil wires. They sprang back as if repelled by an unseen force. The men indulging themselves with her had covered her pale body from foot to toe.

Without a second to spare, Setsura pulled them back and sent them flying behind him. This time came a response like thunder.

Before the lifeless faces could turn as one, the white beast roared. A white tiger more than ten feet long—there could be no more appropriate stage for the legendary beast to make its appearance.

"So you finally showed up." Princess sat up, pushing the enervated men aside. "Seems you have finally found your master. And in pursuit of such wonderful prey. Setsura, does the sight of me start anything burning?"

She seemed to have been aware of his presence from the start.

"Hard to say."

"Then I will set you on fire myself." She gestured to him. "Come here."

The law enforcement personnel turned their faces to him, faces brimming with dissatisfaction and suspicion, more faces and more faces. Abruptly, several of them twisted and distorted, became black undifferentiated masses, and collapsed in front of their stunned colleagues, spouting blood like fountains of black ink.

Flinging the torn-off faces at their feet, Princess declared in a high and mighty voice, "No one shall be dissatisfied with me!" As if the petrified shadows indeed satisfied her, she turned her own exquisite face to Setsura. "So, come. Before you turn into that tiger's next meal."

The tiger howled softly.

"You keep your claws to yourself for now." Her expression shifted. The tiger's whimpering didn't change. "What did you do?"

By *you*, she meant Setsura.

"Oh, nothing," he said with a shrug. "Well, maybe I hobbled it a bit."

"You cut that poor Ko's legs?" Her eyes widened a tad. "Now that it's wounded, the little pussy won't listen to what I have to say." A speck of ghastliness flashed in her troubled eyes. "This should be fun. Setsura, can you slay a giant? Or else—"

"Share your bed? How do you tell a tiger who won't obey to keep its distance?"

"I have my ways. The only other option is to become Ko's dinner. I want to see that, your handsome face chewed to bits by that monster's fangs." Princess licked her lips. She missed a spot of saliva that trickled from the corner of her mouth. She wiped it off with the back of her hand. "That would make for a splendid show. I'm giving you your last chance. Come here."

"Maybe not."

"Idiot!"

"We've rescued Kanan-san and captured her alter-ego. What's holding either of us back from a good fight?"

The truth mingled with a lie. Princess paused and considered her next words. "Hoh. I'll just kill everything and everyone, the tiger included."

The tiger probably understood that. It growled and pranced forward. A splendid and elegant sight. Except its forelegs were

missing.

Showering blood in the wind, the tiger pounced on a spot several yards short of where Setsura had been, while Setsura made a much bigger leap backwards.

A tongue of fire chased after him. That a creature of legend could spit fire was to be expected. This fire, however, blanketed the pile of brick and cinderblock Setsura was hiding behind and melted it away. The temperature must exceed fifty-thousand degrees. The bricks erupted in incandescent flames.

A plume of white smoke traveled along the wall and suddenly vanished into a gap, the mouth of a drainage pipe.

If its fire couldn't follow, what would the tiger do? It moved. Planting its front legs, severed at the knees, it crouched and sprang forward off its hind legs.

The slimy gore squirmed beneath its feet. Its eyes burned with pain and loathing, but its tenaciousness was implacable. The awkward steps yielded to the glassy smooth movements of a wild beast.

The pace became a sprint as it closed on the drainage pipe. Those final steps brought it across the deadly tripwires with an ease only two people there could appreciate.

Peering into the pipe, the tiger shook its head from side to side. The devil wires cut through the air, rebounded, sought its torso.

The tiger defeated the effort with a quick retreat, opened its mouth and roared. Setsura plastered himself against the ceiling. The

shaft of fire shot past only inches away.

Princess's laugh mingled with the hot currents. "Ko is a fast learner. Not the kind of predator that's caught in the same trap twice. These magical beasts always dodge the second strike. Your wires won't get through. Will you be roasted there? Eaten there? Come to me, or don't. Let's see you make another death-defying escape."

"Aw, shut up," Setsura mumbled, scurrying like a spider deeper down the pipe. Any surface, the air itself, was scalding to the touch.

The tiger tried to climb into the pipe.

A wild cry came at that moment. The tiger turned and looked back. A stream of blood shot up. And then another. Three, four, five, six. One by one, the Demon Princess twisted off the heads of these law enforcement personnel. Grabbing some by the hair and ripping them off like the head off a doll, slicing through the necks of others with a slash of her hand, resulting in a splash or spray of blood.

In the midst of the slaughter, accompanied by the symphony of screams from their death throes echoed the unbridled shouts of Princess's maniacal laughter.

Chapter Three

The gory wind blew down the narrow conduit. The tiger twitched its snout. Though born out of dreams, this creature was formed with a lust for blood.

Go on! Git! Setsura silently scolded it.

The white tiger turned around. The humiliation of its defeat at Setsura's hand was fresh in its mind. The desire for revenge—the thirst for raw flesh—it struggled between its instinctual desires and the desire for revenge and reprisal.

It snarled. A glowing ball of fire grew like a bubble from its mouth. Then in a flash, it spun around and raced back to the scene of the carnage, slashing at the survivors with its mighty fangs. Planting its severed forelegs, it cut the spine of one officer with the claws of its hind legs, stuffed the head into its mouth, and plucked it off the shoulders with a shake of its head.

The sound of the crunching skull attracted Princess's enraptured gaze.

"Well, well. My bad for making you smell blood while in the midst of snuffing out Setsura's candle. No rush, no rush. After you've eaten them, keep room for one more in that stomach of yours."

Her shrill laughter reverberated through that dark realm. This woman's laughter wouldn't stop as long as others continued to die.

In other words, until the ending of the human world.

The darkness answered back with a differing opinion. Voices welled up around the bloodbath like the lingering resentments of embittered ghosts.

"No matter your malice, why treat us like this?"

"We are Princess's subjects. Not a speck of uncertainty stains our devotion. However immortal our bodies may be, ripping off our heads *hurts*."

Beneath Princess's feet, around the white tiger, human forms squirmed and writhed and moaned. If not killed in the proper way, a vampire would live forever—with its spine severed, limbs lost, head crushed. A life trapped eternally in that pain was beyond the imagination of mere mortals.

The headless bodies crawled across the piles of brick and concrete as the limbless agents screamed. And so it would ever be.

A mad artist who happened to be present would certainly compose a masterpiece that would give no one who saw it another restful night's sleep thereafter.

"Forgive us," said a security officer, torn asunder from the crown of his head to his crotch.

"Why—why are you doing this to us?" wailed another, frantically stuffing his intestines back into his abdomen.

"We live for no one else but you."

The Demon Princess leaned over and scooped up a handful of the

black gore from the lake of blood. She answered with a glance at the man who made that statement, “You live for no one else but me?” She trickled the blood over her white throat and breasts. “Then no matter what fate awaits you, you will voice no complaint to *me*. That is the calling of a servant. Although I have no use for a person like *that*.”

“What are you saying?” someone called from far away. “Then for what purpose were we—”

“Why ask me? How should I know? Why does dust exist? What is the meaning of garbage?”

“Are you calling us *dust*?”

Princess looked around her, stroking her breasts and her thighs, smearing herself with their blood. The voices came from above the culvert, from above her. But such was Princess’s scorn that she lorded over her servants as if from high above. The emperors of old must have beheld her in no less a fashion.

“Listen carefully. Your filthy blood cannot begin to quench my thirst. And yet you multiply like rats and rabbits. Think. Over the past four thousand years, in all the time I have been alive, shouldn’t a situation like this have occurred over and over? Those unclean things who sing my praises as my servants covering the earth in swarms. You are hardly the first. Have you heard tell of them ruling the world, let alone shaking its foundations? Hardly. I drink my fill and the world slumbers on. Why do you think that is so?”

Princess stopped talking. An invisible ardor flowed into the gaps between the sounds of silence. It swelled and reached its breaking point and gushed forth as a single voice.

“Please save us.”

Princess answered simply, “Because I put an end to them.”

It was as if the world had descended into a different kind of darkness. Even the white tiger paused amidst its slaughter.

“Why would you—”

“Why would you—”

“Why—”

“Why—”

“Why—”

“Who could tolerate the sight of a world filled with such vermin? How do you imagine you appear in my eyes? As loving and devoted retainers, our faces nuzzled together as I take you to my bed? No. Ghouls with rancid blood trailing across their black and bloated flesh, corrupt eyes shining with unsated cravings. Ah, the sound of breath whistling across fangs. It stinks. Such filth cannot be allowed to remain in this world.”

“Weren’t you the one who did this to us?”

“You have spoken enough. That is enough to wish my soul to hell.”

“Please extinguish us.”

Their voices swirled around her. “Please extinguish you? Do you dare tell me what to do? No, you are hardly the first. You call yourselves my servants and swear allegiance to me alone, but that is not your true selves, not what resides in your heart of hearts. There is only one in this world who truly possesses eternal life. The maggots that writhe in the depths are nothing but annoyances. It appears that this time only, and only in this city has Kikiou pondered different thoughts. I couldn’t care less about that old man’s dreams. And maybe all the better to let them come true.”

Her voice grew softer. Her blood-soaked visage turned toward the passageway. There stood a man’s silhouette, like a beautiful splotch of ink.

“You heard me, Setsura?”

“I did,” he calmly replied. “It’s said that the ultimate state of every despot is a lone figure surrounded by nothing but death. It seems that is indeed true.”

“Do nothing and that is the fate of this city. Do you think you can stop it?”

“I don’t know.” Setsura shrugged. It was probably the truth. But he wasn’t the type to throw himself into a fit of desperate improvisation.

At a loss for words herself, Princess blinked. “Then what will you do?” she asked, ignoring her own non sequitur.

The white tiger growled beside her. Its brain, intoxicated by the massacre, rekindled its animosity toward Setsura. Setsura shook his head. That was the truth too.

“In that case, best you not hang around here. Run for your life. Ko here has a long memory. It would like to sink its fangs into your flesh right now.”

“That is okay with you?”

“Is what okay with me?”

“To so readily dispatch me, and at the hands of a beast no less. Is that okay with you? Don’t you enjoy first making your enemies drink the bitter dregs and wallow in humiliation, and then have them plead for mercy?”

Princess pressed her lips together. Revisiting the past was not her

prerogative alone.

“You can’t very well do that with me dead. Do you know where Takako-san is?”

Princess had indeed made her intentions clear that she would torment Takako and so make Setsura suffer, though this was a risky card for him to play.

“Where?” Princess said, narrowing her eyes. She couldn’t have expected Setsura to reply, but it didn’t hurt to ask.

“Good question,” Setsura said.

But there was no denying that he was still without any options. He knew from experience that there was no way to kill the vampire queen with his wires. He’d been wracking his brains during their conversation, trying to formulate his next move, but only ended up spinning his wheels.

The white beast crouched down on its severed forelegs. Princess placed her hand on its neck and pulled it back.

The tiger roared, more a thunderclap.

Without losing his balance, Setsura soared into the air. Dirt and chunks of concrete rained down on the passageway that until now had been hidden behind him. The fire breathed out by the white tiger had weakened the wall, and the shockwave just now blew it apart.

“Huh?”

Setsura leaned toward the right, did a half turn onto his back, and a moment later swung like a pendulum on the path.

More roars and shadows came down at him from the ceiling, the loose ground setting off a chain reaction. The heavens and earth shook like the day of creation.

And then there was light.

The destruction must have reached the surface, for the rays of light unfolded like a white fan, pouring into the tunnel with a mysterious majesty.

Cries—and puffs of white smoke—rose up, the particular sign of a combusting vampire.

Inside the falling shower of dirt and grit, Setsura drew a bead on Princess's position—the strand he'd cast out when he'd flown into the air. Princess wasn't moving. She'd found herself a nook to hide in until the destruction passed.

He could cut her in two, but she'd only flow back together again like warm wax without so much as a scar on her fair skin.

Setsura found himself in the same place where the concrete wall had collapsed. A dozen feet around him in all directions, the rubble piled up forming a sturdy fortress.

The tunnel appeared blocked by a great black mass. The vampires lying crushed beneath it would, until it was removed, live out their lives literally within the earth, gasping for breath, tongues licking the air in search of oxygen, unable to move.

Setsura jumped. He wrapped a wire around a sturdy ledge in the ceiling and landed in Princess's lair. He looked at the ceiling again, and picked out a steel girder jutting out horizontally. He tossed out a

demon wire, yanked it down, seized one end, and adding an extra twist with his wrist.

The pale naked body sprang up from the smoke and debris, a good six feet into the air—though shrouded in the dust it was hard to tell—flailing her arms and legs.

“Put me down. If you don’t—” A mist enveloped her. Her limbs were exposed to the sun.

“Sunlight won’t kill you, but it’s got to hurt. You should be cuttable now.”

“You bastard. Put me down!”

Princess grasped the invisible string holding her up. Her five fingers dropped off like pieces of marshmallow.

“So it is effective.”

But then, for a moment, he hesitated, perhaps savoring that moment of victory. A moment of unpardonable neglect for a citizen of Demon City.

From the side came a blast of white-hot heat. The wire he reflexively whipped in response severed the flames in two and slashed at the white tiger bounding over the mound of earth. Setsura’s left sleeve, covering his face, caught fire.

The tiger nimbly ducked the wire and opened its mouth. A second torrent of flame burst out, from a range that must be impossible to avoid.

Setsura suddenly looked up. So did Princess and the tiger.

Something like a curling mist descended. Its skin appeared cool and damp. A mist in a rain. Two dots of light grew closer from deep within the black semicircle. Setsura recalled what Tonbeau had told him—of the two beasts released from the box the mayor had brought her, one was a dragon.

Fire spilled from the tiger's mouth. Steam billowed up. The rain became a clear drizzle.

As the old saying went: *Tiger at the front gate, the wolf at the back door*—or in this case, the dragon. Out of the frying pan and into the fire. The cold wind touched the back of his neck. Setsura couldn't move. The breath of a dragon. The creature breathing it emerged from the tunnel.

It pushed its long snout forward, the long slit of its mouth, from which drooped an almost comical Fu Manchu moustache, though the humor was lost in the fearsome menace of its glittering eyes. Its body was covered with golden scales edged with a green patina.

"You cannot escape, you fool. Choose which one—choose the claws that will tear you apart!" Princess cried out from the air. She was already shrouded in smoke. The sunlight seemed to have robbed her as well of her powers of levitation.

The tiger roared. The dragon opened its mouth. Its teeth appeared quite small in proportion, but the sheer power of its red mouth appeared to outshine even that of its feline companion.

A flood of fire or water would surely gush forth.

Setsura jumped. As he soared vertically upwards, the two magical

beasts turned their snouts towards him, but didn't attack. Princess was directly along their line of fire.

In a not very sporting move, Setsura put an arm around Princess as he climbed higher, using her as a shield. Only those without their lives truly on the line could call it cowardice.

With Princess under his arm, he passed over the heads of the beasts and set down on the stable pile of bricks.

Past the dragon, the hole revealing the sun was surprisingly small, perhaps a dozen feet in diameter on the surface. Considering the amount of light six hundred feet down, dimensional refracting qualities must have arisen in the tunnels, one of the strange blessings of the Devil Quake.

Setsura was about to shoot to the surface when his vision was obscured by an expanding tide of blue. The flood unleashed by the dragon rapidly exceeded what he'd anticipated—as the strand of devil wire slipped out of his hand.

Part Fourteen: The Elder's Grandson

Chapter One

Tonbeau Nuvenberg cried in Czech, “I did it! I did it!” She slapped a boxing-glove sized fist into a mitt-sized palm.

A beaker holding a transparent liquid sat on the wooden desk. In the hour since Setsura left, she’d been holed up in a laboratory in the back creating this concoction.

“Congratulations,” Takako said crisply to Tonbeau’s dumpling face. “How about celebrating your success by letting me go?”

This Takako was Takako’s doppelganger. Since being strapped to Tonbeau with Setsura’s devil wires, she was her constant companion, locked in an embrace sitting up or lying down.

Needless to say, both of them were getting tired of the arrangement.

“I’d love to,” said Tonbeau in fluent Japanese. “But considering what must be going on in that head of yours, let you get a fraction of an inch away from me and it’d be like setting free a ravenous wolf in a flock of sheep. We’re going to have to put up with each other a little while longer.”

“A little while?” Takako said with a teasing smile.

Their lips were a hair’s breadth apart, creating to the eye of someone who didn’t know better a strangely suggestive scene.

“We’re stuck together until I figure out how to extinguish you or

return you to your original body."

"There's no way. You said so yourself."

"Of course I did. That's why we're getting a hold of the Doctor." Tonbeau removed the cover of a brass speaking tube attached to the stone wall. "Well!" she shouted. "Was he there?"

A moment later, "No," the doll girl answered.

"What is this Doctor Mephisto up to? The Demon Physician, of all people. Is he at the hospital?"

"Yes. But he won't answer no matter what."

"Didn't the pretty boy say something about Doctor Mephisto sending around a dummy of the mayor to steal the box?"

"Yes."

"In that case, we have to consider the possibility he's become enthralled by it. Dammit, I'll just have to ring that man's bell myself."

"I can think of no one more qualified at ringing a man's bell."

"Hmph. A mere doll like you should show a little more deference to her mistress."

"I beg to disagree, but you are not my mistress. You are my mistress's younger sister."

"And you are a lousy block of polished wood!"

Tonbeau slammed down the cover of the speaking tube and folded her arms, or tried to as well as she could with Takako

strapped to her. She paced the room in a huff. Takako dangled there in front of her eyes. To be sure, it was a curious sight.

"Well, whatever. The first order of business is collecting more allies. I'm going downstairs!"

She shouted again into the speaking tube, grabbed the beaker, and headed for the door. The narrow stairway creaked as she stomped down the steps. She exited into a fairly wide hallway. Candle stands lined the walls, the flames fluttering as she passed by and pushed open a wooden door.

A low moan arose. "You awake?" she said, closing the door.

Though it was pitch black, to the eyes of the Czech Republic's second greatest witch, everything was as plain as day.

The room was approximately a dozen feet by a dozen feet. A pungent sweet smell suffused the air. The one-armed man sat up on an iron bed against the far wall.

"I am awake," he said with a nod, "though this aroma is on the pungent side. Could you reduce the intensity?"

"That is for the lover that hangs about you, hardly to be shook off. That ash somehow excites your blood lust. The word is, my girl here reduced that vampire lady of yours to dust."

Ryuuki looked down at the ash covering the bed. Though turned to dust, Shuuran still tried to protect him. Perhaps she was sleeping now.

"Brings a whole new meaning to being stuck on someone.

Speaking of which, you recognize this?”

Ryuuki gave Tonbeau—and Takako strapped to her—a puzzled look. Then a spark of recognition dawned on his face.

Tonbeau was holding a wilted clump of flowers in her caterpillar-like fingers. Originally cool white with large petals, they were now wrapped with streaks of brown, the glory with which they once bloomed having faded long ago.

“Moon lilies.”

“Exactly.”

“The ones that grew in the garden of Princess’s manor house?”

“The source is uncertain. Two hours ago, they were used as the currency in a certain exchange.” In place of the wooden box hauled off by the pretend mayor, the flowers had been left behind. “Besides you, I’ve heard tell that other young man—Setsura-chan’s erstwhile ally—is a traitor to the cause. When it comes to these flowers, I can think of only one use—restoring someone to his right mind.”

Tonbeau produced her hand from behind her back. The liquid sloshed back and forth in the beaker.

“You distilled the substance?”

“That I did.”

Ryuuki looked up. “Which?”

Tonbeau went over to the rope and chains hanging from the ceiling. Grabbing one of the rusty chains raised the sound of turning gears. Another figure dropped from the ceiling. His ankles were

bound by iron shackles attached to chains that wound around his body.

At first glance, he looked like he'd just been hauled out of a torture chamber. Though this young man was probably otherwise fit as a fiddle. His pair of wings and bat-like appearance identified him as Yakou.

"Hey, wakey wakey," Tonbeau patted the graceful face on the cheek.

"You're such a boor," Takako complained, even as a lewd light filled her eyes.

"Shut up," Tonbeau glared back at her, though their heads were only three inches apart, so there wasn't a lot of force behind it. The result was like two kids in a staring contest.

Yakou's eyes opened. "What are you doing?"

"You are about to find out," Tonbeau said with a sinister smile, the smile of a witch about to poison the virtual young knight.

She waved the beaker back and forth beneath his nose. "Drink up."

"What is that?"

"A rejuvenating agent."

"What are you doing, Sir Ryuuki? Stop this fatso." Yakou squirmed in frustration. The Ryuuki below him was supposedly his comrade in arms. "They are enemies of Princess. And enemies of you. Will you betray Princess?"

To be precise, he was the archetypal betrayer, but he possessed no such memories now.

Ryuuki said, “I would prefer to stay as far away from all that as possible.”

In the face of the painful echoes in his restrained voice, Yakou’s exasperation melted away. But quickly emerged again. “Traitor,” the Elder’s grandson barked.

“You shut up too.”

Tonbeau Nuvenberg’s mitt-sized hand covered his mouth as she raised the beaker with the other. She pressed the mouth of the beaker against her sausage-like lips, spun around, took away her hand and slapped the beaker against his mouth.

Perpendicular with the floor, the contents of the beaker should have spilled out. But not a drop did. It was attached to his face like a suction cup, fitting the contours of his face from his cheekbones down to his jaw.

The liquid covered his mouth and nose. Yakou had no choice but to choke and gag and swallow.

“That’s a good boy.”

Removing the beaker with a *pop*, Tonbeau retreated several steps and examined the young man hanging there upside-down.

“You bitch!” raged Yakou.

But his features quickly stilled. The fury melted out of his face. His eyelids closed. And opened a moment later, wavering and filled

with an altogether different kind of light. After blinking his eyes several times, they revealed an expression closer to horror.

He hadn't lost his memories in the process. What he retained resembled the sensation of wandering in a deep and pervading mist, but all of them were still there—he who was manipulated by Princess, he who fought with Setsura—and now they became the personification of the shame and humiliation coursing through his bloodstream.

"What the hell have I done? Release me! Undo these bonds holding me fast!"

"Seems he's back," said Tonbeau, taking hold of the chains.

"But is he really all right?" Takako objected.

"What, you don't trust my concoctions?"

"No, but you are better safe than sorry. That Princess has him wrapped around her little finger."

"I am the Yakou I was before all this! Believe me!"

"Of course you are!"

With a shove of her palm, Yakou dropped out of his restraints head first. A split second before colliding with the floor, the wings fluttered and hummed and he swooped into the air.

As he landed, he glanced at Ryuuki. "I do not believe you." His words were filled with enmity. Ryuuki was his sworn enemy. "You should be perfectly aware—that woman killed my grandfather. And I will have my revenge."

“Whoa, hold your horses. I perfectly understand where you’re coming from, but I owe him one.”

“Nobody owes him anything. Left to his own devices, he would destroy not only this city but the world and everything in it.”

“C’mon, give it a break. He’s raised his hands and hoisted the white flag and thrown in the towel. Are you one to kill prisoners who’ve already surrendered?”

Tonbeau slowly turned around. Ryuuki was standing there. The man who rose languidly from the bed was a completely different person from before. A fierceness suffused his whole body—not a murderous vibe, not loathing, not hostility, not anger.

But the fighting spirit of a warrior. He was General Ryuuki. “The past can never be simply relegated to the past,” he said quietly. “It is true that when your grandfather was killed, I served Princess. If fighting me serves your purposes, then let us fight.”

“Oh, this is interesting!” Takako’s eyes sparkled.

“Knock it off.” Tonbeau jabbed her in the side, making her wheeze. “What good would that do? Yo, Yakou-chan, I’ve got something to say to him.”

“What about?” Takako asked.

This time Tonbeau shut her up with a slap, though it was more a sumo wrestler’s open-handed punch that knocked her head back.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but step aside,” Ryuuki said softly, though his voice clearly communicated his lack of regard for her

concerns.

The Czech Republic's second greatest witch darted away and put her back against the stone wall on her right. It wasn't so much that she'd given up on persuading them differently, just that she sensed in Ryuuki's voice the power to do whatever had to be done.

"Is this venue acceptable?" the great general asked.

"Fine with me."

Whatever these old enemies felt, Yakou's answer was equally subdued.

Ryuuki made the first move. A simple gesture. He stretched out his left hand parallel with the floor. An invisible wave raced toward the wall. Yakou floated into the air. The air was his natural domain.

Ryuuki threw out a two-fold blast of *qi*. One aimed directly at Yakou. The other would be absorbed by the wall and rebound at him from an unexpected angle.

Yakou ducked the direct attack and waved his hands. Exercising the intuition of a warrior, Ryuuki jumped back from the silent *qi* licking the stone floor.

He went down on one knee. "So you use it too?" he said, clearly delighted. He hadn't numbered this one among Yakou's talents—a fellow wielder of the same *qi*—it couldn't help but make his heart race a little faster. Admiration colored his features.

Yakou's body spun around. His open wings were caught by the time-delayed *qi* slanting off the walls. It then struck the ropes and

chains dangling from the ceiling.

The rope ruptured. The chains and shackles shattered. Tonbeau screeched and dove for the cover of the bed. The loud report filled the room. The flaying rope slashed open the mattress on the bed. The chains struck, sending fissures through the wall.

The rope bounced off the mattress, the chains ricocheted off the walls in a deadly dance of death, flinging off shrapnel that could take apart an armored vehicle, not to mention a human being.

Ryuuki stood there, eyes half-open, arms hanging at his sides. The deadly projectiles stung at his shoulders and chest and head.

"Ah!"

That shout came from Takako as Tonbeau jumped beneath the bed, a space that would admit one normal person only with difficulty, let alone this mountain of a woman. And yet as Tonbeau crammed herself in, this alter-ego, this *other* Takako, didn't take her eyes off the soldiers and their death match.

What prompted her surprised reaction—death rained down upon him, but Ryuuki didn't die. The flying shards came to a sudden halt a few inches before reaching him, intercepted by an invisible wall.

"That's the first time I've seen such a defensive perimeter formed from *qi*," Tonbeau said in blank amazement. The end of a piece of rope grazed the tip of her nose. "Ack!" she exclaimed.

All movement in the room came to a halt. The scene resembled a strange still life.

The astonished Yakou floated down. Ryuuki calmly turned around. The doll girl was lying on the ground in front of the open door.

Chapter Two

After a brief mutual glance, and a silently agreed-to armistice, the two soldiers ran over to the young girl. A piece of the chain was buried in her delicate right shoulder, from which a blue fluid oozed.

"Sorry," said Yakou, biting his lip.

"I am okay. It doesn't hurt."

"We should get you patched up as quickly as possible," said Ryuuki.

"Move it, move it, move it!"

The third member of this party. Casting the chains aside, Tonbeau bent over to examine the wound. She sniffed. "No big deal. Swapping out of a few bones and reconnecting a couple of blood vessels should do the trick. A quarter-hour at most. The question is how you climbed off your sick bed and made it down here. No matter what kind of doll you are, getting hit by that old man's *qi* should have hurt like the fires of hell. All I did at the time was patch you up here and there."

"Would that old man be Kikiou?" Ryuuki asked.

"The same."

"A splendid little girl," said Ryuuki. "You should see to her at once."

The small white hand rested on his knee. "We can't go."

“What are you saying?”

Yakou bent over. His face filled her deep blue eyes. “Are you concerned for my welfare?” In the face of such pluck, Yakou couldn’t help but nod.

“If she and I were to leave, you would start fighting all over again. I don’t wish for either of you to die. I brought myself down here to bring a stop to it.”

“But—this man is an enemy of my grandfather. He is an enemy of the whole world.”

“Ryuuki-sama finds such aspects of himself no less abominable. He should stay here. In this city, in this house, if we cannot destroy him, we can at least let him sleep—or live—forever. No matter how accursed and defiled an existence he might have led, here he may pursue life and liberty, if not happiness. Is that not the meaning of Demon City?”

The doll girl’s clear firm voice did not beg or plead, but only stated. But would it touch the hearts of these men in the grip of their murderous impulses—

“He loathes himself—I can believe that is true.” Yakou glanced at Ryuuki. “But what do you do when he lusts after blood? When he rises again to his calling as Princess’s servant?”

“At such a time, Tonbeau-sama and I—no, I alone—”

She didn’t have to spell it out for him. Yakou looked down at her with sad admiration. “All right, then,” he said. “What about you?”

“I could not ask for anything more.” Ryuuki placed his hand over the doll girl’s wound and then took it away. “How does that feel?”

“Much better.”

“You should take better care of yourself.”

“Well, come along. What are you two going to do?” asked Tonbeau Nuvenberg, scooping the doll girl up with one hand.

“I’m returning to the Toyama housing project,” Yakou said with an air of anxiety.

“We need to talk about that incident. The general will remain here. Sleep well.”

With Takako in her embrace, and holding the doll girl in one hand, Tonbeau left the room with Yakou behind her. Just before the door closed, through the remaining sliver of light she said, “You really came to the rescue. Much appreciated.”

The darkness wrapped around Ryuuki, followed by a long stillness. Then a heavy, heartfelt voice said, “I saved another person. Me, of all people.”

The story Yakou heard from Tonbeau shocked him more than any of his disgraceful memories. Her account of the “Toyama District Nuclear Incident” left him pale at first, gripped by despair and then anger.

“Who is responsible?”

“Hard to tell. I heard it from that girl. I don’t know all of the details myself.”

“What about the survivors?”

“The official damage and casualty reports haven’t come out yet. No word on who lived and who was vaporized. Nobody is living in the ruins now. A restricted land filled with a blue radioactive glow.”

Yakou’s shoulders slumped. Tonbeau said curtly, “Save the despondency for later. Whoever tried to kill you all off did it because that woman and her gang showed up. They’re the bad guys here. Job one for you is dealing with them. As for the ones that actually pushed the button—revenge is best served cold.”

“You’re probably right.” Yakou’s body shook, but he quickly regained control. “But I can’t sit around here twiddling my thumbs. Once we have dealt with *them*, I will apprehend the criminals and punish them in the most appropriate medieval manner.”

“Good approach. That would be perfectly fine.”

“Where is the box?”

“Over yonder.” She jerked her chin past Takako’s cheek. “Doctor Mephisto’s got it.”

“Then that is where I shall go.”

Yakou got to his feet, for the time being thoughts of his colleagues dismissed from his mind.

Tomoko Kanan had been studying its movements for the better part of an hour. As if brushing aside the thin darkness hanging about her like a veil, the finger stroked the surface of the wooden box.

That finger filled her whole view—its entrancing gracefulness—

every word she could think of related to beauty floated through her mind and evaporated like mist. None of them fit, none were truly appropriate. It had taken her less than an hour to curse her impoverished vocabulary.

The hand stopped. And time around her started again.

"Interesting," said the white silhouette.

Tomoko could have sworn she heard the gloom around them moan in turn. *We too wish to become that silhouette's shadow. We wish to trace the outlines of that figure.*

"Can you open it?" Tomoko asked.

And then started a bit herself. This was a question that no one should ask the hospital director. It was like asking him if he could cure a patient.

Mephisto backed away from the table holding the box without answering and sat down in an armchair.

The faint creak of the spring brought her back to herself.

"It is as you say." Mephisto rested his eyes on Tomoko. That was enough to make this university professor forget about those porcelain hands. "This box is definitely *it*. However, opening it would take as much time and effort as sealing it did."

"Even you—"

"Our enemy is four thousand years of Chinese history," Mephisto said, in a manner that on any other day might suggest that even the Demon Physician had a sense of humor. But not today.

Entranced by the movements of his hands, Tomoko had the sense of a slightly demonic air filling the large room and shivered. To start with, why was the room so dark?

"In any case, the key shall reveal itself, as the day always follows the night. No, it has already come."

Mephisto's eyes glittered. Tomoko shuddered. The gleam in his eyes had a particular crimson glint. She suddenly remembered why she had entrusted her daughter to this doctor.

The chiming of the intercom interrupted her thoughts.

"Mephisto here."

"A person has arrived wishing to speak with you. You don't have any such appointments scheduled."

In which case, a meeting should be impossible.

"Show him in," said Mephisto, and hung up.

He got up and circled around the chair Tomoko was sitting in. She felt his hands on her shoulders. She had heard of his particular dislike for the fairer sex. And yet she could not deny the flame of desire welling up in her chest.

"All humans have throats, but yours is exceptional."

It took several seconds for the meaning to crystallize in her mind. Tomoko couldn't move—mesmerized by Mephisto's touch, and because of a different sensation.

Fear. Who was this person?

The hands let go of her. But for some reason she couldn't turn around. A different presence entered the room. The magical miasma it emitted kept Tomoko rooted to the chair. Considering the distance to the director's office, the brief amount of time taken getting from the receptionist's desk to this room convinced her that this new guest was in no way Mephisto's inferior.

Then where did he stand?

The presence came closer and stopped right behind her. And where was Mephisto? For the first time, she sensed him nowhere.

"So it was here," an old man said in a hoarse voice. "No matter where it goes, the connecting links will always join up. Finding the end point is only a matter of time and simple effort."

She strained her ears, but couldn't make out Mephisto's replies, only the enlivened responses of the old man in the course of what appeared to be a conversation.

"I am very sorry, but this box is our lifeline. I ask you to return it as speedily as possible."

She could not hear what was said in turn.

"And why is that?" Now there was a harder edge to the old man's question. The next words came quickly. "Yes, joining our little band is altogether too great a risk for you. Do you want to know why? Even should the Demon Physician lose but one drop of blood, whoever drinks it would rule over him."

Tomoko's whole body went rigid. Fear poured forth from the very pores of her skin.

The air hummed around her. The hoarse voice cried out. At the same time, the room was flooded with light.

"How do you find the illumination, Doctor?" he asked, the question rising in timbre from the dredges of pain to a shout of triumph.

This was sunlight, Tomoko's uncomprehending mind somehow grasped the simple fact. Not artificial sunlight. The sun that graced the sky of every season, that woke the living from their slumber and played across the farmers in their fields. That gleaming force of nature.

Tomoko couldn't begin to comprehend how he had gathered it, stored it, brought it with him, and now unleashed it. But she had the feeling that none of that was beyond the grasp of the man behind her.

"Hoh! You cannot move, can you? Understandable in this sunlight. Become one of us and you will behold a world no mortal can see. But the toll on your freedom is high. I knew I could at least count on you, Doctor Mephisto, to maintain a grip on your wits while in the light. Well, then. I shall take the box and take my leave."

His voice approached the desk. A moment later, the sound of smug assurance turned into an exclamation of surprise.

Unable to bear the mystery a minute longer, Tomoko sprang to her feet and whirled around. Before her eyes was an old man with a white beard. He was holding the box and writhing. The way his spine arched backwards, the box itself had sent a shock of pain through his arms to his body.

Mephisto must have devised something since bringing the box here. He had only touched it. That those beautiful hands, that mystical loving touch, contained such awesome power was hard to believe.

A small sun radiated forth from the old man's chest. This glowing globe, this jewel pouring forth its vivid light, tumbled onto the floor. A golden arrow of fire shot down from the ceiling and straight though it. The jewel itself showed no changes at all.

"Damn you—Mephisto—to do such a thing—in such a way—"

Tomoko had never heard spoken such deeply held resentment in all her life. And never would again.

The old man's arms rose up, as if to smash the box against the floor.

"Stop!" Tomoko cried out.

"I won't hand it over, Mephisto!"

His hands waved back and forth. A cracking sound came from around his shoulders. Still holding the box, he jumped toward a corner of the room, where a bookcase was filled with volumes of unknown origins. All the more surprising was the elliptical opening that rippled across the surface. The box and the old man's arms were sucked into it.

One even stranger scene after the other. When Tomoko finally looked back at the old man, off in the distance came the sound of a door closing with a heavy thump.

“Kanan-san,” Mephisto called out behind her.

However overjoyed she was that he was back to “normal,” Tomoko felt a chill down her spine.

“That ball of light, could you wrap it up with something? It is a bit too bright for me to handle right now.”

There were a mountain of things she wished to ask him, but she put them all out of her mind. No matter what questions she asked and answers she got, this was all beyond her powers of comprehension.

She couldn’t find anything useful in the immediate vicinity, so Tomoko took off her jacket and covered the little sun. She was afraid it might burst into flames. Nothing happened. This was light without heat.

Mephisto approached through the shadowed darkness, not Tomoko, but the oval tear in the bookcase.

“So this is the connecting link?” mused Mephisto, gazing down at the space, wavering like a patch of rough sea. “And what happens when the box connected to it is cast down it?”

The intercom chimed. “Yakou-sama is here to see you.”

Chapter Three

When Setsura regained consciousness, the first thing he saw was the black rocky ceiling. He tried to sit up but couldn't move a muscle.

The reason why quickly became apparent. His body was covered with devil wires, strapping him to the earth like Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians.

"That little bitch. She's the death of any party."

He quit struggling and gazed into space. Though he couldn't move his hands or legs, strangely, he didn't feel any pain.

His eyelids dropped and he focused all his faculties on the invisible colors and the silent sounds around him. The sensations from his back and the scene before him said that he was still underground, in the culverts extending out from the underground water treatment facility.

This was a natural cavern not constructed by human hands, or a hole dug long ago and abandoned.

A small noise reached his eardrums, the sound of running water, an underground river or water still coursing through the ruins of the culverts and sewers. That life should go on in a place like this was hardly surprising in Demon City. It was always better not to jump to conclusions too quickly.

Without any presentiment, a pale face gazed down on him from

above. “Can you move?” the Demon Princess cheerfully asked.

“What do you think?”

“Well, at least you didn’t drown.”

“That was the dragon’s flood?”

“Yes. Had I not intervened, you would have ended up another *Dozaemon*. Though that might have proved no less interesting an outcome.”

“Never a dull day for this busybody of a princess.”

Dozaemon was a famous sumo wrester who had drowned. The name had once been synonymous with all those who met their end in a similar fashion. Setsura couldn’t help being a little impressed that anybody in this day and age would use the metaphor.

“I really could have drowned to death like that?” He smiled like a flower. “If that’s what you want, then let’s do it and get it over with already. Why come to the rescue?”

“Because such a demise would hardly begin to assuage my feelings. You are the only man who ever severed me end to end.”

“What’s with this personal grudge business?” Setsura said with an air of disdain. “Man, I don’t get women. Always obsessed with the details, never seeing the big picture.”

“Why do you keep getting in Kikiou’s way? Is that your way of saving this city?”

“Speaking of which—” Setsura paused and thought for a moment. “That doctor—the one who went all in with General

Ryuuki—made it my job. And then he went and got mixed up in all this mess and became one of you."

"According to Kikiou, he did it all in a quest for knowledge. What do you think?"

"Doctors and long-lived women remain a mystery to me."

Princess laughed. "You will continue to pursue me on account of a man like that?"

"You are not a friend of me and mine."

"Hmph. You mean that witch?"

Princess frowned, the kind of frown that would make a masochist come. "Pursuing me to revenge such an insignificant speck of a life sounds an awful lot like a personal grudge to me."

"I suppose so," Setsura confessed.

"At any rate, you are a strange one. Such a pretty face on a head filled with such puzzles. It's like you spend every day staring at the sky watching the clouds go by."

"I could almost agree with you. But every new day is another day going to the mattresses with the *uruchimai*."

Princess knit her brows. "What's that?"

"Ah, your education is lacking. The non-glutinous rice used to make *senbei*."

"*Senbei*?"

Princess looked all the more confused, as if she was playing

hooky the day the subject was covered in school.

"A confection, a kind of rice cake seasoned with soy sauce and baked."

"Sounds like something girls would play house with."

"I suppose so."

"What a way to earn your daily bread. You truly lead a pitiful life."

"Give me a fucking break," Setsura shot back. He had no use for pity from the person he was trying to kill, though he wasn't all that put out. Princess really did seem to be sympathizing.

"Why not give that miserable life of yours a fucking break and come to my world? You could watch the clouds go by for ten thousand years. Bow down to me and ask nicely and I will make such wishes come true, just like that." With a snap of her fingers.

"That's one thing I would rather you not do. To tip one's head to this personification of perverse pride is the last thing on earth anyone should do. Besides, I like making *senbei*. It's fun. You should give it a try."

"Maybe so."

"So, now what? Boil me or bake me, whatever you want to do is up to you."

Were he some over-the-hill made man, the line would be pitch perfect. But coming in the languid words of a half-asleep youngster, the effect was altogether odd.

“Fine. I’ll kill you then. But first, do you remember what I told you?”

“When, and about what?”

“About tormenting Takako and my promise that you would bend your knee to me.”

“Oh yeah, that.”

She might as well be talking to a brick wall, and it was getting her dander up. She drew herself to her full height. “Enough! If that’s how it’s going to be, then before getting down to business with you, I’ll bring Takako here. You will watch me drink her blood with your own two eyes. Then we’ll see what that smart mouth of yours has to say.”

“Do you know where Takako-san is? She’s got a literally split personality right now, remember?”

“I don’t know where she is *here*. I haven’t tasted her blood. But I do know where she is *there*. In my kingdom. What do you say? I’ll go fetch her right away.”

“And I’ll take the opportunity to escape while you do,” Setsura said in a threatening manner.

With a dismissive glance, Princess put her fingers to her mouth and whistled. In front and behind him, out of his line of sight, a pair of growls rose up from two creatures.

“We have our watchers. Especially the one whose legs you cut off. I’m sure it didn’t take it kindly and isn’t about to forget.

Besides, can you move? The devil wires binding you are your own."

"I'll think of something."

"Then you'd better think of it before I get back."

The Demon Princess strolled away.

"Hey!" Setsura called after her. "You know, it's still light outside!"

"Do you think me as vulnerable as my wretched servants?"

Her figure was swallowed up by the darkness. When the sense of her presence had vanished as well, Setsura's thoughts returned to the nature of his predicament.

A fierce growling came nearer. The white tiger, Ko. Setsura could hear the loathing in its voice, the pain. Things were not looking up.

Princess had told the cat to kill him if he tried to escape. She hadn't told it not to if he didn't. In this condition, move a pinky and the animal was unlikely to resist the urge to sink its teeth into his flesh.

But in fact he didn't move a pinky. Stuck here between a bunch of rocks and hard places, safe was as safe does. But he still resolutely set about freeing himself.

Even when unable to move without conscious intent, there were parts of the human body that, under the control of the autonomic nervous system, moved naturally of their own accord, such as the heart.

Setsura focused his mind, not toward his heart but his arteries.

Within another second, something delicate began to float along inside the blood vessels.

Where had they stolen in, these sub-micron devil wires? Forgetting their steel-fracturing powers, they crept along the capillaries in sync with the beat of the heart.

Where to? To a place where they could be wielded at will. While observing them closely, Setsura sought out another place.

His whole body entombed within the devil wires, there was one "release point" that would, in an instant, undo all the rest.

Princess's method of confinement was a variety of the rope binding methods of ancient China. When bound with a single strand, no matter how tightly confined, when severed at the exact right location the rest would easily unravel. However, according to this technique, that would only sever the rope in that area. The sections restrained by that same rope would not budge.

So even if the torso became free, the neck or hands would not.

The ancient executioners put it to practical use when dealing with the condemned. A prisoner was placed a dozen yards in front of a pack of ravenous dogs and given a dagger with which he could release himself. It should be possible to sever the single length of rope anywhere, but no. The only hope was to find the release point.

This wouldn't have been something Setsura might have learned from the Elder or Yakou. The extent of the young man's library was anybody's guess. Perhaps the subject was covered in a book he once read, or on a television program he'd seen. Or the intuition that had

allowed him to survive the daily carnage of Demon City.

But even Setsura couldn't have foreseen one additional variable. As the devil wires drifted through his bloodstream, the eyes of the dragon watching him lit up. From the way he'd attacked Setsura with his raging waters, this legendary creature was a being who could control it.

It lurked in those mysterious rivers and lakes, and emptied into the world of the four elements, and so it ruled over the movements of the outpouring waters down to a single drop.

The movements of waters, the movement of blood.

Though the sub-micron thin threads might result in no adverse effects, the all-so-subtle disturbances left in their wakes were beyond his control. The dragon read *its* presence in a complete stranger and sensed danger in the wind.

Whether or not he knew what the dragon knew, a speck of light glistened on the tip of Setsura's tongue.

From there, the devil wires traveled to his right ankle. The point furthest from his hands was the release point Setsura had detected.

It was not his bloodstream that sent forth the threads, but his tongue and his will. Pressing tongue against teeth, scraping teeth against tongue, he controlled the sub-micron wire with the small motions born from those interactions. Though not with the dexterity of his hands, he guided them easily to that point on his ankles.

Then a second, unexpected development.

The white tiger lumbered forward. Seeing the twitching muzzle enter his field of view, with a start Setsura realized why.

The wires released a spot of blood when they broke free of his capillaries, hardly enough to see with the naked eye, but as the dragon could detect the flow, the tiger sensed the smell.

Shit, Setsura wanted to exclaim, but kept his lip buttoned. Any movement of his tongue would be communicated down the wires. These two animals would grasp Setsura's intentions in a flash and deliver a proper scolding.

The space between his lips and his feet was a river of death as wide as the River Styx. The wires swiftly reached out. Ko jerked its head lower, lured by the smell of the blood clinging to the wires.

The devil wires touched the release point.

The white tiger roared. Ko's mind had made the connection. Blue-white fire kindled at the back of its gaping mouth. The devil wires would work their magic at the same time Ko breathed forth the flames. Perhaps a tenth of a second would make the difference.

In that instant, Setsura felt himself behind the eight ball. And that meant death. He hit the release point and rolled to the side just as Ko spat fire at the upper half of his body.

The incandescent inferno shot upwards, lighting up the darkness. The dragon had struck from below, ramming its long jaw into the big tiger's neck. White steam billowed up where the jaw and neck met, the dragon pouring its magical waters into its torn throat.

For fire-breathing creatures, fire itself was the stuff of life.

Not pausing to figure out why Princess's servants would mutually self-destruct in such a fashion, Setsura sprinted for the nearby cover of a big rock. Hot water and steam pelted his face. The firmament rumbled like an erupting geyser.

A white plume blanketed the two creatures, locked together in a deadly embrace, their writhing limbs barely distinguishable.

The dragon released its hold. The tiger resorted to its one remaining weapon and clawed at the dragon with its hind legs, attempting to gut it. Golden flecks scattered like flowers.

"That was close," Setsura said under his breath. He crouched down and started to move, sending his devil wires out, checking out the passageway in front of him.

As if fleeing through the night, he ducked through a narrow opening and suddenly found himself in a large room. He was drenched from his previous encounters. The big creatures were two or three hundred yards behind him, but their earth-shaking howls went on unceasingly.

"Enjoy yourselves," Setsura said, glancing around.

He was in one of the big water treatment culverts. From further away and deeper in was a murky glimmer, the route the Demon Princess must have taken to the surface.

"Hold on," Setsura blurted out loud. On the verge of sprinting off in that direction, he came to a halt. "If I just leave them be, who says they won't come after me again?"

He looked at the hole spouting steam like a smokestack, followed

by the reverberations of a noticeably louder pair of overlapping screams. The hole spouted blue-white flame.

"Holy cow."

Setsura ducked down and jumped back a good dozen feet. The blazing band seemed to chase after him, then quickly retreated, shrank down to a few wispy curls and was sucked back into the blackness.

The sounds extinguished with the flames. The two beasts must have fought each other to their mutual deaths.

The cloud that now passed across the comely face was one of confusion. Setsura tilted his head to the side and asked himself, "Why did that dragon turn traitor on my account?"

Somebody must have commanded the life-saving actions of the dragon, though the *senbei* shop owner could not imagine who.

The conversation commenced as soon as the young scion strode into the room, carrying an oriental air about him. And strangely enough, nothing he said seemed the slightest bit odd.

"Doctor Mephisto," Yakou called out in a stern voice, stopping ten feet away from him. "No, that is your *old* name."

The doctor in white didn't react. His expressionless face was no less beautiful. No matter what the situation or predicament, this doctor was always clothed in beauty.

"This dim light, those red eyes, aren't the tips of fangs jutting from the corners of your mouth? You should be called by the same

name I go by."

"A vampire." Next to him, Tomoko stood there petrified.

"So you must have undone Princess's spell. And I can imagine why you came here."

"No." Yakou shook his head. "I am not certain myself, whether you are an enemy or an ally."

He looked at Mephisto as if asking to be rescued from his dilemma.

Part Fifteen: Dreams of the Demoness

Chapter One

"There is no need to worry about me," said the white doctor. His voice was such that everything he said seemed wrapped in that wan, calm darkness. "I am no one's enemy, just as I am nobody's ally. React to me no differently than you remember."

Yakou didn't answer, the consequence of his lingering confusion. In this case, all those who became creatures of the night bent a knee to Princess and recognized her dominion. He found it hard to accept that this doctor alone should prove the exception.

"Rashness will yield us nothing right now. Please sit."

Yakou felt no alternative except to sit down in the chair indicated.

"On my way here, a murderous and hostile vibe passed by me. That was Kikiou, I take it?"

"Yes. This is Tomoko Kanan, Takako's mother." Mephisto went on to briefly describe what had just happened.

"So that box was definitely it."

Tomoko answered with a small nod. However she might be the incarnation of the calm and dispassionate scholar, for a middle-aged woman from *outside* Shinjuku to retain such composure *inside* it, let alone witnessing the antics of what might better be called demonic beasts in the office of the director of Mephisto Hospital, required a heart and soul of a particular sort.

In any case, Yakou's expression shifted from understanding to contemplation. "But what would happen when casting that world down the other end of the nexus connecting this world to itself—that is a question for physicists and mathematicians."

"There is nothing in history that suggests a solution?"

Tomoko drew her brows and said in a small voice, "There is an account of something similar from the Qin Dynasty, but I do not remember the details."

"Where do you think the box is?"

"Well—"

"You couldn't construct a parallel route?"

"Not the kind of task normally in the purview of a medical doctor."

"Didn't you learn everything about that world when you were there?"

Mephisto's expression shifted, a fleeting smile, a shadow no one saw. Yakou's question struck a raw nerve.

A visage of demonic beauty turned quietly to Yakou. "You sin against knowledge itself," he said. "I amassed much knowledge in that world. But it is not nearly enough. There is much more, equal to the heavens and the earth, that awaits me. I should be on my way."

"No matter what the world?"

"No matter what the world."

“As I am now, I must destroy it.” Yakou unconsciously raised his hands to his lips. “Will you stop me?”

“There is knowledge in that world,” Mephisto said shortly.

That was all he needed to say. Yakou focused his thoughts on a single point—whether he could defeat this doctor. He felt the doctor’s eyes on him. Were these the eyes of a man who hungered after blood and feared the sun? What in the world had those eyes seen?

The intercom buzzed. Those eyes of darkness faded into the distance. “What?” Mephisto said to the nurse’s face floating above the desk.

“Setsura Aki is here to see you.”

“Show him in.”

“He is already on his way.”

“I figured as much.”

Yakou caught in Mephisto’s voice reverberations of exactly what he’d heard before, and that raised waves of discord in his heart. The only thing in existence that aroused in the doctor ordinary human emotions. Yakou restrained these whispering sentiments breaking like foam upon his consciousness, that seemed awfully akin to jealousy.

A minute later, the door of the director’s office opened solemnly and the young man in black entered.

“What’s with the box?” he asked.

Mephisto repeated the same explanation he'd given Yakou. His features clouded and Setsura raked his hand through his hair. "Takako is in there." He gave Mephisto a hard look. "And Princess should have returned as well. What are we going to do?"

"We have yet to come to an agreement on a way forward. But we should be on our way."

"Are you connected with it?" With Princess's world, he meant.

"No. We have no choice but to discover the nexus for ourselves."

"Time's a wasting, Mephisto," Setsura said. "Night is falling. The people of this city will be waking from their sleep. The police are mobilizing, but the odds of beating back the entire population with peaches alone are slim. We have to destroy that world, eliminate the place they return to, and put an end to them once and for all. Otherwise, the victims will only multiply. There won't be enough Toyama housing projects in the world to handle all of them."

"It's quite unlike you to talk in such immoderate terms. Has your personality taken a turn for the worse? Perhaps you have been on the receiving end of a defiling kiss?"

"Yeah," Setsura said in a clearly pissed tone of voice. "That's all I've been doing of late, making kissy-face." He followed up Mephisto's sigh with a loud smacking sound.

Directly in his line of sight, Yakou raised the back of his hand to his mouth and grinned. A moment later, the smile froze on his face.

"So, the entire citizenry becoming creatures of the night—?" Mephisto grumbled, averting his eyes from Yakou. "Maybe that's

just what they all want. What if we left it up to them?"

"Sure, tell that to the mayor," Setsura said. He gazed back at Mephisto. "Everybody in this city becoming the same is the last thing anybody wants, and blood will run in the streets to keep that from happening. We need to do whatever we can to stem the tide."

"He's right," Yakou agreed. "Mephisto, any stopgap measures?"

"It will take time."

"We have no other means."

"If you want to leave that world in one piece, we need to cooperate."

"There are other means."

They all looked at Yakou. "I got here first, but Tonbeau-san should be along presently. If she and the doctor got together, I'm sure they could find a way."

"Yeah, but—"

Setsura flashed Mephisto a satisfied smile, the only human being on the planet allowed such latitude. "Can you say no to that woman? Otherwise, you won't be much use to us as a vampire."

He said so in as blunt a tone as he could manage. Mephisto had opened his mouth to respond when the intercom buzzed and announced that Tonbeau Nuvenberg had arrived.

"What a day!" The fat witch rubbed her hands together. Takako wasn't attached to her.

“What happened to your mad killer?” Setsura asked.

“I chanced upon a way to separate us. The doll girl has the babysitting chores. But more importantly—”

On her way from Takada no Baba, she’d been attacked three times by “citizen vampires” and barely escaped.

“So they’ve come as far as the business district. Seems the police have got their hands full already.”

Yakou folded his arms across his chest. After griping about getting her just compensation from the mayor for all her troubles, Tonbeau said, “Hey you, young vampire general there, say we take care of that woman and her merry band, what happens to the rest of ’em?”

Setsura and Tomoko exchanged glances. That was perhaps the most important question of all. Yakou’s features darkened with concern. “I don’t know,” he said.

“You don’t know?” Tonbeau exclaimed. She slapped her ample belly for added emphasis. The rolls of fat shook like a wave-tossed sea.

“As you surely know, the dominance relationships among vampires are not set in stone. Eastern Europe traditions state that if the highest-ranked vampire, the preeminent sire who drank the first drop, is destroyed, then all his victims follow after him. But there are also cases where, as a general rule, only the direct descendants die with him.”

“Do those made complete servants, who totally become vampires

themselves, return to normal?" Tomoko's question was another everybody wanted answered.

The reply this time came without hesitation. "No. After the sire is destroyed, only those victims still in the process of becoming vampires once again assume human form."

Everybody waited for the next shoe to drop. And it came from the representative of this city. Setsura said, "Tonbeau-san, can you forge a connection to that box from here?"

Tonbeau smiled broadly. Setsura relayed what Mephisto had told them. "Sure," she said, folding her arms. "Using the Akashic Records, there is nothing that we cannot accomplish. However, I'm not sure our little house could withstand another go at it. Doctor, your powers will be required."

"I refuse."

"You what."

"I'm sure Princess will give you a nice pat on the head," Setsura said.

Tonbeau glared at Mephisto. "I don't believe it," she said.

"Bingo," said Setsura.

"The doc got bitten too?"

"That's the way it turned out."

"It's all starting to add up."

Tonbeau gave Mephisto a once-over and nodded. "There's no

shortage of scholars, artists, and theologians itching to become vampires. Drawn like moths to the flames of that world. So what did you see?"

"I would understand if you harbored the same inclinations."

As if taking his words as warning, Tonbeau jumped back half a dozen feet. The cow could move like a rabbit when she had to. "Heh," Setsura mused.

The intercom rang in a different tone. Mephisto picked up the receiver. No holographic image displayed. Two seconds or so later, "Condition?" he asked.

Sensing something in the air, Yakou looked at Setsura. Setsura had nothing to add.

"I'll be right there," Mephisto said and hung up.

"What's up?" said Setsura. "You don't look so good."

"The plan you have been hatching," he said as he headed for the door. "Let us undertake it." He explained to his stunned audience, "Kikiou collided with several patients on his way out. Four are reported in critical condition. Three of them are yakuza, but the fourth is a five-year-old child."

Mephisto returned thirty minutes later.

Setsura said, "Well?"

"Only the child died. Come here."

In response to the beckoning white hand, the four came to their feet. Setsura put his hand on Tomoko's shoulder. "Please wait here."

His face seemed to glow in the gloomy darkness.

“But—”

“I promise to save your daughter. The world we’re going to encounter after this was not constructed for ordinary purposes.”

“My daughter is there,” Tomoko said in a sad voice. “And there is where I wish to be also.”

“I will be sure to tell her that,” Setsura said softly.

He couldn’t tell whether his reassurances were effective or not. But Tomoko’s eyes filled with both tears and trust. Perhaps she had some notion of the kind of work he did when he wasn’t working for a living.

“Please,” the mother said with a bow. “Please find Takako for me.”

“Don’t worry,” answered the proprietor of the Aki Detective Agency.

Chapter Two

Mephisto led them to a what looked like a bronze door. The patina was an even deeper shade of blue, perhaps from infrequent use.

“Huh,” Setsura said. He almost sounded impressed.

“So this is a first for you too?” Yakou said.

“Yeah. Seen it plenty of times from the outside, but never gone in.”

Fifteen feet wide and thirty feet high, the door brought to mind a gate built to admit a giant. A ring glittered on Mephisto’s left hand. One side of the door began to recede.

A gust of wind struck them in the face. It came from beyond the door.

“That’ll send a shiver down your spine,” Tonbeau said, hugging her arms across her chest. “The same feeling I got going into the laboratory of Doctor Faustus. Makes the hair stand on end.”

“Quite a lot of it,” Setsura said.

“Shut up.”

“Let’s go,” said Mephisto, and started off.

The door had opened all the way by now. A faint light wrapped around them. In the somehow familiar sepia glow, Setsura had that

sense of recovered memories of times past.

Mephisto continued on his way, as if pushing the light aside. Giant mechanisms grew from the ceiling and floor, striking strange poses before the visitors. He recognized the electron microscopes and laser range finders, but the rest were a complete mystery to him.

None of them seemed able to maintain a state of equilibrium in this world. None had a fixed form. Even their warped and twisted platforms changed shape from moment to moment.

An eyeball fifteen feet in diameter opened its camera-like iris and stared at them, but took no other action.

As they proceeded apace toward an iron door tucked into the back of the roomy space, Tonbeau raised a hand and made a grabbing motion in the empty air.

Yakou and Setsura furrowed their brows. Tonbeau opened her plump hand, revealing a translucent blob squirming there. It looked like a clump of snow fungus.

“What’s that?” said Setsura.

“A miasma?” said Yakou.

“I am familiar with miasmas. But not one that ever looked like this.”

“It is extremely rare,” said Tonbeau with evident pride as she strolled along. “Normally, when miasmas take corporeal form, they’re much uglier, dirtier things. This one is remarkably pure. But —touch it—”

Setsura glanced at Yakou. He didn't look terribly concerned, so, what the hell, he nudged it with the tip of his finger. And pulled it away.

"It's cold."

"This one must be a dozen degrees below freezing. It steals heat from whatever comes into contact with it. The air around it is hardly there at all. This space seems half-filled with spirits of a high order, and half-filled with ghosts of a low order. Otherwise, something like this couldn't exist here."

"Huh," Setsura said, dutifully impressed.

Mephisto stopped in front of the iron door and looked back at them. "Through this door is the Resurrection Room."

"This is the place, huh," Setsura said, a timbre in his voice different from before. "It's said that the one thing that Doctor Mephisto cannot do is raise the dead. But that is a lie. Because there's this here Resurrection Room, you see. Among his thousands of patients, a lucky few are snuck down here, brought back to life, and then under the cover of night, taken back to the city through a secret door. Well, at least according to Shinjuku's urban legends."

Mephisto didn't reply. When the legends in this city revealed their true faces, what kind of countenance would they show?

At a touch of his fingers, the rusty door opened inward and ushered them in. Stone walls lined the large room, so large that, throw a stone hard and it would not reach any of them or make a sound when it landed.

In the center of the room were an operating table and an old wooden desk, sitting there as if left behind by accident. Not far from the desk was a medicine cabinet. These were the only furnishings in this legendary room in which the dead were said to rise from their deathbeds.

"Man, I'm all on pins and needles," said Tonbeau, rubbing her burly arms.

"I wouldn't have imagined there was a place like this in Shinjuku," agreed Yakou.

"Totally." Though it was hard to tell how authentic those last impressions were. "Can you make a connection here?" Setsura asked.

"No problem," Tonbeau assured him. "It's not *stuff* that matters here. In a place like this, we can assemble anything we need."

"Lie down there," Mephisto said, indicating the operating table as he went over to the medicine cabinet.

Setsura looked at the other two as if he expected one of them to step forward. When they didn't, he laid down on the table with a resigned expression.

He was a man, after all. A very handsome man, to be sure. And lying defenseless on an operating table. A brilliant artist letting her feeling flow through her brush without restraint would surely create from this scene a masterpiece of unbridled licentiousness.

Three pairs of eyes watched as Mephisto reverentially sorted through the medicine cabinet, reached in and selected a vial, then

returned to Setsura's side. He was carrying a blue, wide-mouthed bottle.

"Take two of those and call you when I get there? Spare me the lame magic tricks."

"I am always serious. Drink it."

"What's it going to do to me? Give me a literal spiritual high? Maybe I'll float there."

"It is not that kind of drug. Your physical being can make the journey. But however ready you may have made yourself, you cannot point yourself in the proper direction. That is Miss Tonbeau's job."

The same Tonbeau was staring intensely at Mephisto's hand. "That drug—well, no, I don't imagine you ever let it out of your sight. But now and then other geniuses in the outside world have cooked up similar concoctions. One day out of the blue a man will grasp the truth of the universe, another will travel to the edges of the Milky Way. They drank something like that, no?"

Mephisto didn't answer. "Drink it. A mouthful or a drop, the effectiveness will be the same."

"How's it taste?" said Setsura, eyeing the bottle.

"Not sweet, but perhaps a hint of cherry."

"Works for me."

Setsura popped off the top and downed the contents in a single gulp. His throat bobbed as he swallowed, though it'd take a bit more time to permeate his body through his bloodstream.

The man in black grew indistinct.

“And now to recite the sutra that will send you to that other world.” By now, even Setsura’s pricked-up ears had dissolved like diluted paint. “Miss Tonbeau, if you would please.”

“Gotcha,” Tonbeau Nuvenberg said, giving her belly a hearty slap. She stood next to the operating table and spread her arms wide and began to chant an incantation.

A wind kicked up from an unseen quarter. Setsura’s body was barely recognizable as human. Yakou exclaimed beneath his breath as colors snaked around Tonbeau’s form and spread out in a mist.

Sweat, born of her powers of concentration, streaked with tints and hues. Setsura’s body slowly floated towards her. The wind howled around them, forming a whirlpool. Yakou watched as Setsura swirled closer, and was sucked into the witch in the rainbow.

Here was Mephisto’s reason to have her there. The flesh and bone of this fat witch itself formed the gate into that other world.

The hazy tips of his shoes passed through her chest, and the wind suddenly ceased. Tonbeau collapsed. Yakou ran up and caught all three hundred pounds of her. That was one strong vampire.

“Doctor, some medication—”

“And stat!”

“Well then, nothing to worry about, I guess.” Tonbeau’s vigorous response set Yakou’s mind at ease.

Mephisto gazed quietly at the operating table. “Not much longer,

don’t you think, Miss Tonbeau?”

A question Yakou hadn’t expected.

“So it seems.” Lying down, the big woman nodded. “Definitely right around the corner. The end of everything. It may be a good idea to get ready to move.”

“You mean, leave here?” Yakou asked.

The witch responded with a somehow sad smile. “This city. No matter how you look at it, all of its citizens turning into vampires makes life plenty hard for the real humans. Hold on, that means all of the shops and parks are empty during the day—”

The multicolored lady had ferreted out a silver lining of profit in the situation. Yakou turned his attention to Mephisto. At some point, he’d sat down on a wooden chair at the desk and seemed lost in thought. A dreamlike fog seemed to fall across his sculpted features.

Mephisto said in a cold quiet voice that not even Yakou’s ears could hear, “The medicine I compounded here crosses over with you, Setsura.”

The vampire eradication squad returned to the Shinjuku Police station soon after the sun set. Perhaps weighed down by the anguish of slaying their own citizens, they seemed far more exhausted than when they left, their wan faces revealing their cruel misery.

Several of them had passed through the lobby and came to a stop. Peaches dangled from the ceiling in front of their wide-open eyes. In a flash, their attention was drawn to the bloodshot eyes of their

comrades filled with loathing, and all the more so to the fangs gracing their mouths.

They were already out. They had already come here.

“Stakes!” somebody cried.

The stunned cops swung their right hands in a growling fury. The peaches rained down on the floor. A vampire cop stepped on one. Blue smoke rose from his feet. He reared back. A police officer charged, cradling a stake.

A spatter of blood, and they fell together to the floor. Another one of his coworkers feasted on his neck.

“Hit ’em with the peaches!”

“Form a barricade!”

Dodging the swaying peach boughs, the figures in their now misshapen uniforms scattered inside the police station. Gunfire broke out. Pieces of uniforms shredded and flew apart. A black dot opened on a forehead and the back of a head blew out. White bone peeked out among the nerves and flesh and muscle.

The cop bared his white teeth and laughed. Another rushed forward and stuffed a peach into the wound. Flames burst forth. He swayed and staggered. His former colleague buried a stake in his chest.

The smell of blood filled the lobby. “Don’t shoot!” came a command over a loudspeaker somewhere. “This is the assistant chief. The invaders have been repulsed. Place peaches at the entrances and

exits and windows. Search the building and make sure everybody passes a peach test. They've no doubt hidden themselves well."

Listening to the vigorous voice, the cops all exchanged glances. The vampires had penetrated even the police. The state of affairs was hardly any different at the ward government building. And at Mephisto Hospital.

The old woman approached the front desk. "How can I help you?" the nurse receptionist asked.

She bowed her head politely. "My grandson was admitted to this hospital. He is having an operation."

"What room number?" asked the nurse, scanning the lobby.

The old woman cocked her head to the side, but for another reason entirely. This nurse was different from the regular receptionist, the visitor thought. The icy air about her rose up. Her skin was unnaturally pale.

"And who are you, young lady?"

"I am the assistant head nurse to the director."

"Well, then. I'll be on my way."

"Wait!"

The old woman stopped. The order had an imperative edge, as if daring her to disobey and risk the repercussions.

"What?" the old woman quavered.

"There is the smell of blood about you," the nurse said in a dusky

voice.

“Me? That is—”

“Coming from around those red lips.”

The nurse pointed. And like pressing a button, the old woman transformed. Not hiding her fangs, she leapt at the nurse, who, in turn, smashed a peach against her forehead.

The slight form sprang backwards through the air. Pressing her hand against the stain, she ran for the automatic doors.

Having observed all this, another nurse called out, “What are you doing?” and ran to the door. Through the first set of doors, she came to a sudden halt.

A packed crowd of people waited outside the lobby. The demonic air about them froze her in her tracks. A moment later, it turned into a battlefield.

The old woman swayed and tottered. Upon reaching them, they fell upon her neck. Screams erupted. The fangs of these ordinary citizens slashed into her writhing body, quickly shredding it until there was nothing left.

Pairs of red dots gleamed in the faces of the human shadows staring back at the nurse, as if the front courtyard was covered by a swarm of fireflies.

“Stand back,” came the command from behind her.

Faced with no realistic option but to comply, she switched places with what turned out to be the nurse from before. She thrust out her

arms, her hands cupped together, as the black wave of inhumanity rose up and threatened to engulf her.

She opened her hands, revealing a golf ball-sized globe of light. The bright flare splashed across the courtyard. The sunlight was sucked into the wall of people, overflowed like a river pouring over its banks, and filled all the spaces between the heavens and the earth.

This was either the same globe Kikiou had thrown at Mephisto in the hospital director's office a short time before, or a similar device Mephisto had already fashioned himself.

This brilliance, suffused with life and something apart from artificial light, aroused a scream of pain from these creatures of the night. They fled like a quickly retreating tide.

"Those people—those people just now," the nurse mumbled in a daze.

The assistant head nurse to the director placed a hand on her shoulder. They gazed together at the front courtyard, still as bright as day.

"Let's lock down the entrances—no, as long as that light burns, they won't be coming back. There are still people outside the gates who need saving."

Then she added in a quiet voice, "So it seems they have finally arrived here."

Chapter Three

Setsura knew he had reached the realm of the Demon Princess.

However the entrance might change, the accessway remained fairly fixed. Passing through the familiar surface, walking through the stands of trees, thirty minutes later he came to the shores of the lake.

Against the dark green backdrop, the soaring and majestic manor house was only a few hundred yards off. He would be better off assuming that Princess had already returned and had Takako in her grasp.

When Tonbeau engaged the Akashic Records and he was drawn out of there, Takako had been in the back of the Crystal Pavilion. But as a rule, the sire always knew where the servants were and what they were up to.

He was struck by the realization that there was one way to retrieve Takako safely. Setsura was equally confident that Princess would have paid no heed to his return. Such was the indifference of the lord of this world, an existence immune to rot and decay.

“That is my only way in.”

He returned temporarily to the forest, emerging again at the back of the manor house. Since arriving in this world, a strange vibe had wrapped its tendrils around him. *Nothing was alive*. The fluttering leaves on the sun-drenched trees, the summer breeze skittering

across the lake—it all felt like—nothing.

There was light and there was wind. Light and wind literally painted on a canvas.

Setsura was beginning to see through the mirage to the reality of this place. This was a new development.

“Where the hell are they?”

Setsura approached the manor house. There were several dozen servants inside. All it’d take was getting nabbed by one.

The manor house was still as death, not only devoid of servants, but of any signs of life at all. Come to think about it, he hadn’t heard any birds in the forest either. Something strange had happened when he’d been thrown into the connecting link. Whether for good or ill at this juncture all depended on luck and fate.

“What to do, what to do?”

In the midst of the dappled sunlight playing across the leaves and the trees, Setsura closed his eyes and folded his arms.

“You could always do nothing.”

The voice—definitely that of Princess—descended on him from out of the empty air.

“Where are you?” asked the unflustered Setsura.

“Anywhere you like. You’ve done well coming this far. That girl is so important to you?”

“Her mother asked me to find her. I will bring her back.”

“What if I slit her throat as we speak? No, no, you know I could never do anything like *that*.”

“No, you couldn’t.” Hard to say at this point whether that complacent smile was for real or was an act.

“What an awful man. The lengths you go to, to toy with me. Come to the manor house.”

“Where in the manor house?”

“The front door will suffice. Wait there.”

“I’d prefer to see proof of life first.”

A moment passed. “Fine. Here.”

Something like a red mist fell out of the sky without a sound and spread out at Setsura’s feet.

“The proof is in the pudding. Or the blood. Hers. There will be but a drop left before I drain her dry. A smidgen. You’d better hurry, Setsura. The rule of blood awaits.”

The haunting echoes of the voice reverberated around him and rose up toward the heavens and was drawn into the blue sky. Setsura looked down at the blood staining the green grass and earth red.

“She ain’t kidding.” A note of tension crept into his languid voice. “Well, I’m sure that put all our minds at ease. I’d better go.”

As he set off, he didn’t appear any different from before.

When he arrived at the foyer of the manor house, the door opened on its own accord and welcomed the young man in. Without

scanning the great hallway inside, his eyes alit on the woman standing in the center like a blossoming white flower.

“Where is Takako-san?”

“Relax.”

“Not hardly likely,” Setsura sulked.

Hardly surprising, Princess smiled all the more broadly. “So what were you thinking on your way here?”

Setsura grew more sullen. “This and that.”

“About that girl?”

“I suppose.”

“Oh, stop lying. You weren’t thinking about anything. Your face will freeze like that.”

“Can we get down to business here?” Setsura said with unusual force. “I’m here to get Takako. Where is she?”

“You think I’ll tell you?”

“I have my ways, if that’s what it takes.”

Not the kind of thing he was ever wont to say, but he was clearly at the end of his rope.

“Isn’t it all so much water off a duck’s back to you?” Princess countered with an equally strange severity.

“What is?”

“Everything.” Princess fastened her eyes on the young man in

black. “Your burden, perhaps, your ball and chain. Everything that binds you to this world. Money, power, fame, women—you couldn’t give a damn about all of that.”

“You’re not my shrink or my guidance counselor. I’m a businessman. Every day I have to balance the books and keep my eye on the markets.”

“You definitely are a *senbei* shop owner.”

The look in Setsura’s eyes said this woman had a habit of remembering useless facts at inconvenient times.

“But you’re the sort of man who could toss it all away at a moment’s notice and scamper off to greener fields. Dealing in such prosaic goods hardly suits you. You should spend your days lying on the grass watching the clouds go by.”

“You’re not the person I would turn to for life planning.” Though there wasn’t that sharp an edge to the criticism, suggested she was not that far off the mark. “Whether I watch the clouds go by or bake *senbei*, it’s got nothing to do with you. Relieved of these burdens, then what?”

“Look at the world. Go when and where you wish without a by-your-leave to anybody.”

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

The unaffected answer prompted a wry smile from Princess. “You like this wretched city so much?”

“What are you asking a question like that for?” Setsura said. An

understandable response.

Princess laughed airily. “No reason. Let’s go see Takako.”

Feigning an utter lack of interest in him, she proceeded toward the inner door and then down a gaudily baroque hallway.

Setsura said, “Hey, don’t you think there’s something strange about this world?”

“You noticed?”

“Yeah.”

“Kikiou worked his fingers to the bone making it, but the facade is wearing thin. If you were wondering what would happen if you threw this world down the connecting link without breaking it, well, now you know. You end up with this.”

“They all went to meet their maker, huh? What are you going to do about it.”

“Kikiou is a very busy man,” Princess said, obviously delighted. “It won’t be much longer until that man puts his greatest plans into motion. How long do you think it will take until Shinjuku becomes fit for only insects?

“You don’t know?”

“I couldn’t care less. Any city inundated by the likes of *them* I don’t care to catch a whiff of.”

Setsura didn’t concern himself with how Princess felt about her own victims, but this surprised him.

“That old geezer plans on extending the reach of Shinjuku’s vampires to the outside world? No matter how many fellow co-conspirators you might make for yourselves, the people out there aren’t so stupid. They’ll take steps soon enough. Count on vampire eradication becoming an international effort. And every night when they going hunting for prey that isn’t there *en masse*? Who’s going to play the Pied Piper? You’ve got a pretty chancy situation on your hands here. Does Kikiou know what’s really in your heart?”

“I couldn’t care less about that either.”

“So them’s the breaks, eh? And yet despite not caring, you’ve done all that to Shinjuku.”

“That’s what not giving a damn means.”

“There is that too.”

Princess threw back her head and laughed, showing her white throat.

“What’s so funny?”

“How could I not laugh? Your personality lives up to everything I expected of you. It’s good having a man like you around. Come to think of it, Demon City might be worth keeping around as well.”

“You know—” Setsura stopped and glared at her.

“What?” said Princess, turning her smiling face to him, like a big sister teasing an ornery little brother.

“If you really don’t give a damn, then how about you just up and leave? You coming here is all water under the bridge, but nobody’s

going to hold it against you if you leave, so what's stopping you?"

"I just may do that."

The Demon Princess gave Setsura a strange look. Setsura said nothing. A frightening glow filled her eyes. "Come along. See the completely changed woman and tear your heart out."

For the next several minutes, it was as if a demonic miasma had assumed female form, strolling down the hallway.

Setsura found himself in front of a familiar black door. Princess's bedroom. She went in first. Takako was lying on the same luxurious bed as before.

"Let me ask you this—the real thing?

"See for yourself," Princess scoffed.

Setsura brushed past her and approached the bed. Based on appearances, this was definitely Takako. The skin revealed by the thin blue nightgown was bluer than blue, almost electric white. He felt for her pulse. It was there, faintly. She had not become a vampire *in toto*.

He raised her up in his arms. She was as soft as before, and as cold as ice.

"Taking her with you? That's not why I brought you here."

Princess raised her right hand in a suggestive manner. A pale arm wrapped around Setsura's neck like a snake. The sensation couldn't help but arouse from this usually laidback man a startled response.

"Aki-san."

Her voice and breath caressed his face. Her eyes glowed red. Her breath smelled of the fresh earth of a grave. Setsura reflexively tried to free himself. Takako's thin arms proved as immovable as rebar.

"Aki-san. No, Setsura-san. What did you come here for? Did you come here to save me?"

She licked her lips as she spoke, all the more provocative a gesture coming from an otherwise rationally-minded woman.

"I came here to save you," Setsura quietly answered, neither flustered nor afraid.

"Thank you. But there is nowhere else I wish to go. I'm so tired and cold. Warm me."

"Well, here I am," Setsura said. His next words were the last thing anyone would have expected. "Go right ahead."

He held her in an embrace, as if to nuzzle her cheek.

"No!"

Princess's cry rang out like a silver bell. Takako pulled back from Setsura, or rather, was torn from his side. Takako struggled, but Princess easily held her at bay with a single hand and stared in the face of her own victim. She had not exhibited such loathing even when the Elder scalded her face.

"No. You shall not take Setsura's blood. That is—" She interrupted herself with a fierce look of anguish. "Setsura! Why would you allow her to—?"

"Why not?"

“You must flee from her. She must pursue you. You must not bind her hand and foot with your wires and take her out of here. No, you cannot. You must run hither and yon in your attempts to escape while she chases you, while I quench my thirst with her blood. If you do not wish her to become my servant, then kneel and plead. Or beg that I take your blood instead. But instead you bare your throat to her? What are you thinking? No matter. The fun I had in mind is all for naught now. Let us cut to the chase, Setsura.”

The Demon Princess hadn’t finished speaking before a red line bisected her face from the top of her head to her chin. She smiled. As if intimidated by the expression itself, the line disappeared.

She pressed her coral-red lips to the blue veins running down Takako’s exposed neck. Takako arched her head back. An enraptured glow suffused her countenance. An ecstatic gasp escaped her lips.

There was nothing Setsura could do, and Princess knew it as she removed her lips from Takako’s throat. Two threads of blood connected the corners of her mouth with Takako’s skin. Her crimson lips all the redder, the blood dripping from her fangs painted brilliant flowers on her white robe.

Standing there holding Takako’s enervated body in her arms, they created a living sculpture as sublime as it was savage, the Demon Princess in all her glory.

The heroes of old who marched off to pillage and slaughter would have frozen in their tracks at such a sight, struck not by the horror but sheer beauty.

Even the genie in black stood there transfixed, like an artist

intoxicated by a glimpse of heaven.

"Just once more," Princess breathed. Her eyes sparkled. "Take her blood once more and she becomes mine. When that happens, there is nothing you and your friends can do to save her. Does that sit well with you, Setsura? Can you stand there and wait for me to kiss her neck again? Or will you bow and beg? The hour of decision will be delayed no more."

Princess's words hummed with a song of victory. Setsura's answer could speak of nothing but defeat. She focused her blood-red eyes upon his resplendent face, not allowing a speck of his suffering to escape her attention.

Setsura said in a casual and unaffected manner, with not even the twitch of an eyebrow, "I don't think so."

"What?"

"Ask you for a favor? Not a chance. And drinking Takako's blood? That's out, too."

"Idiot," Princess spat out. "What are you prattling on about? Are you aware of the position you are in?"

"Yeah. And I've got an offer for you."

"One you think I would accept?"

"Sure."

He nodded with complete confidence. The murderous intent in her eyes wavered. There was a human being on this planet that could render her speechless, if only for a moment.

“Release Takako. And in exchange—”

“You’re going to say you’ll offer me your blood instead?”

Setsura didn’t answer for a minute. Then he fixed Princess in his gaze and said, “Bingo.”

Now Princess held her tongue. And then an indescribable expression rose to her face of inhuman beauty. “What schemes do you have up your sleeve?” purred her bloody lips. “No, it doesn’t matter. The time has come when you will voluntarily cast yourself into my embrace. Any final words, Setsura?”

“Nothing springs to mind,” Setsura said.

His blunt impassive answer made up Princess’s mind. Takako crumpled to the ground like a melting waxwork. Princess moved to the bed. She licked the blood from around her mouth and said, “Come to me, Setsura.”

Her white arms reached out to his shadowed visage.

Part Sixteen: Winds of Destruction

Chapter One

Three days had passed since Setsura had been sucked inside Tonbeau's body. In that short span of time, several significant events were unfolding in the world outside Shinjuku.

Fifty terrorists planning an attack on a solar energy research facility in Europe set out from the Middle East.

A nuclear reactor under construction in Mozambique melted down, exposing a thousand people to deadly amounts of radiation.

The world's first semi-permanent deep-sea oceanic research center was established over a mile down the Marianas Trench off the Philippine Islands, but disagreements over leadership issues fueled an ongoing secret feud between Japan, France and the United States.

Unexpected wildfires scorched twenty-five thousand acres of old-growth forest in Quebec province in Canada and had not yet been extinguished. The cause was traced to a malfunctioning ranging laser on a British reconnaissance satellite. The Canadian government claimed it was deliberate, in retaliation for the denial of fishing rights off the coast of Newfoundland. The dispute was ongoing.

In Tokyo, a thief stole into the official residence of the prime minister, released canisters of laughing gas, and with the personnel debilitated by the chemically-induced mirth, left behind a letter that only said, "Borrowed it."

What had been borrowed left the prime minister and the cabinet

of the ruling party trembling with fear. The SDF explosives recovery team was immediately mobilized.

And meanwhile, in Shinjuku—

"I don't suppose you've heard anything back?" asked Tonbeau Nuvenberg, during her daily visit to the hospital.

From a corner of the gloomy Resurrection Room came the answer, "Unfortunately, no," said the Doctor, his strangely beautiful voice more haunted than usual.

"The mayor had me in for a chat today. He says hello. After this incident is tidied up, he's going to recommend that I be granted official certification as a witch. Hey, consider the possibilities! Open chain of Czech-style divination shops and cash in on all those idiot tourists!"

The fat lady did a little dance.

"How is General Ryuuki faring?" Mephisto asked.

Rare for him to inquire about somebody not in his care. Ryuuki was his vampiric sire, something Tonbeau was still in the dark about, though she probably wouldn't care deeply one way or another if she knew. Finding out that his blood had been taken by a vampire had panicked her for about five minutes.

She was highly—perhaps horrifyingly—adaptable. It was doubtful at this point if she had any idea what "tidying up" this "incident" would actually involve.

"Aw, gentle as a little puppy. The doll girl has taken a liking to

him. She waits on him hand and foot."

"In that case, it would appear that Princess has not been in contact with him."

"No surprise there, what with the way she's been jonesing after Setsura."

"That woman is the epitome of whimsy. So that might not necessarily be the case."

"Naw," Tonbeau said with great confidence. "He's out of the frying pan and into the fire. She's also the epitome of a little lust bunny. Things must be getting very sticky for Setsura about now."

Usually a woman with an apparently poor grasp for the meaning and effect of her words, she interrupted herself at that point. "Man, it's cold in here," she said, hugging her shoulders.

"You'd best get on home and look after Ryuuki like a hawk," softly advised the voice in the darkness. "He cannot refuse a command from Princess. When that happens, the doll girl could not handle him on her own."

"True, true. I'd better be on my way."

As if she'd come here only to boast of her good fortunes, the witch turned herself around, like a dump trunk in a narrow alley. Keeping Princess's retainers on a tight leash would go a long way to "tidying up" this incident.

She stopped and look back. "By the way, what are you up to, Mephisto? The receptionist tells me she hasn't seen hide nor hair of

you for the past three days. How's that vampire transformation going for you?"

"I am fashioning a certain something."

Tonbeau felt the hairs inexplicably stand up on the back of her neck. "What?"

"You will see soon enough."

"Yeah, but I'd rather find out now," Tonbeau said, turning all the way around.

"Now is not the right time to make any announcements."

"Not the right answer." The witch rolled up her sleeves, exposing her hamhock-sized arms, the product of washing and cleaning and assorted heavy lifting. "No lover of mine can remain silent on such a subject. Out with it. Or I'll start making a nuisance of myself around here."

"Who is whose lover here?"

"You are."

Tonbeau answered in a tone of voice that suggested all was according to the will of God. She jabbed her hands through the blue darkness. An invisible miasma spilled from her crooked fingers tracing a whirlpool in the air.

The opposing reaction was—silence. "Hah!" Tonbeau waved her hands.

The flash of lightning cast a purple glow across the azure gloom. The bright, jagged bolts coursed again and again through the blue

arch, acquainting the darkness with the unknown light.

"All right, then. I will tell you."

The fat lady said with a complacent smile, "See? There's no need to resort to violence as long as we all understand each other."

"Come this way."

Without any evident signs of suspicion, Tonbeau stepped into the darkness. The blue glow stained the world around her. Doctor Mephisto glimmered like a white shark prowling the depths of the sea.

Next to him sat what appeared to be a brass mechanism of some sort. Pipes jutted out in all directions from a surface covered with rivets, along with levers and knobs. It looked extremely old.

"What in the world is that?"

"It is a device that governs the summoning powers you demonstrated."

Tonbeau hiked her eyebrows almost to the vertical. "I don't believe it."

"Exactly." His porcelain smile widened in the azure gloom. "Manipulating the Akashic Records with magic as you have done imposes severe time limits, making necessary the use of a manmade mechanism."

"An Akashic Records controller, eh?" Tonbeau muttered, her voice like bubbles dissolving in water. "I'd heard of such things being created, but never thought I'd see one for myself. You truly are

a hardcore citizen of Demon City. So is it complete?"

"Almost."

"When do you think it'll be complete?"

"There is only one bolt left to tighten."

Tonbeau audibly gulped.

"Time is of the essence. There is another man out there thinking the same thing."

"You mean that bearded old man called Kikiou."

"Exactly."

"Any evidence that he's still here?"

"Just a feeling."

"I believe you. But where is he hiding?"

"He is a scientist. In a situation like this, he'll come up with a scientific solution, for which he'll need the right tools and the right amount of space."

"So, I imagine you got informants and the like out there looking for him?"

"The search is being undertaken by a third party."

"Well, if you don't mind, I'll take care of it. I'll bill the mayor."

"Do as you see best."

"So when are you fastening the last bolt on that contraption?" Tonbeau asked eagerly. She took an inherent delight in all things

strange and out of the ordinary.

“Tonight at midnight.”

In Mephisto Hospital, it seemed that time as well influenced the completion of a mechanical device.

“There’s no way I’m gonna miss that.”

Tonbeau turned her backside to him, swathed in a long skirt, and chuckled. “Hmm, perhaps another machine will spring to life about the same time. The Akashic Records being fiddled with from two separate locations—that should be interesting. I’m definitely not going to miss it.”

Mephisto quietly watched as she clomped off like a big Holstein. This time it was weirdness all around, though a particular spark of concern glowed in his eyes.

Even Doctor Mephisto was anxious about what the future held in store, and Tonbeau had put her finger right on the cause.

Where was Kikiou? In fact, he had secreted himself in a most unexpected location. An underground room made of stone. It resembled a warehouse. A mountain of wooden boxes and furniture lumped together with glass implements and machine parts of unknown origins or purposes.

At a glance, they clearly had nothing to do with the everyday life of ordinary folks.

What was this unordinary warlock doing there? He was building something. The result of which he held in his lips that—boldly,

cautiously, delicately—moved and wriggled like no old man's ever should.

He had lost both arms in his fight with Mephisto. Using only his mouth, he demonstrated a fineness of control a normal person could never hope to achieve with his fingers.

The shape of his creation was impossible to discern, a tangled mass of glass and steel tubes, odds and ends joined and connected with needle and thread, like the useless product of a child's unbridled imagination.

And yet without hands or fingers, he finished delicately binding two bolts together with colored cords.

"Hmm," he said, his eyes burning with evil knowledge. "This leaves just one more to join to the body. The deadline is tonight at midnight. Shall I check on the condition of the other?"

With these encouraging words, the great scholar and warlock shoved what appeared to be a pile of junk between the boxes with his feet, and then with a nimbleness that belied his years, proceeded to the door a good six feet above him and started up the stairs.

The door was made of copper. Through the door, a quite narrow hallway appeared. Compared to the vastness of the warehouse, the space was so confined as to make a visitor doubt the architect's sanity.

Mumbling imprecations to himself, he made his way down the hallways and after a number of twists and turns, exited in another room. A room like a laboratory.

Among the antique instruments and generators were arrayed articles well beyond human imagination. The object Kikiou was after sat on a large lab bench. With no concern for his surroundings, he leaned forward and licked a protuberance wrapped with a coil of wire.

"Energy was injected *through* the Records. I don't see a fundamental problem here. As was to be expected."

His words evaporated into the air. He whirled around like a leaf struck by a brisk wind and hid behind a distiller.

The door opened a second later.

A fat, mountain-sized woman entered the room, followed by a small golden-haired girl. A strange vibe filled the still room as the residents of this house approached the same contraption that Kikiou had been working with.

The fat one twiddled with the same protuberance. "The one Doctor Mephisto made would appear to employ the same mechanism. My big sister wrecked the converter. There's no sense trying to make it good as new, but if *that* alone is attached, it should work well enough."

"I believe you are correct," said the small girl in the satin dress.

Tonbeau Nuvenberg and the doll girl—they were in the basement of the home of Galeen Nuvenberg in Takada no Baba.

Hiding behind the steel distiller, Kikiou smothered a smile. Three days before, having been driven out of Mephisto Hospital, he had returned here on foot and snuck into this underground room.

The visitor identification device in the foyer, the intruder detection and prevention networks, the lethal, magic-powered weaponry—none of them activated or even clued into his presence—breaking into this house in broad daylight was the kind of trick only a four-thousand-year-old warlock could pull off.

He must have crossed paths with Tonbeau, who was visiting Mephisto Hospital at the time, leaving the doll girl behind.

Kikiou's objective was a return route to that world. For a variety of reasons the usual methods would not work, making that particular device an absolute necessity.

Even in Demon City Shinjuku, this was the only place that could provide the tools and the raw materials and the workspace to make it.

Nevertheless, this was a high-risk endeavor of incredible boldness and daring, not to mention waiting for the doll girl to drop her guard so he could filch materials from this laboratory and complete his project in the dimly-lit warehouse. And without any arms to boot.

Not noticing this oddest of all squatters, Tonbeau easily picked up the device. "Nothing wrong with leaving it here, but it just doesn't feel right. Let's stick it in the warehouse. Heave ho."

She tossed it to the doll girl, who caught it readily and without a stumble, though it must weigh a good two hundred pounds.

After the two of them left, Kikiou came out from behind the distiller, a cheerful smile on his face. The owners were carting the

crown jewels off to the thief's own lair. If this wasn't a stroke of extraordinarily good luck, then nothing was.

However, after the two proceeded to the staircase to the warehouse and left for the upper floors, he hurried to the hallway, only to stop in stunned silence in front of the wooden door.

A white cross was affixed to the door. At first glance, it appeared to have been applied with masking tape, but the warlock discerned a design of considerably more enormity hidden inside it.

"The mark of the Yellow Emperor. There's no underestimating that Czech witch. She got her paws even on this." His hoarse voice crawled down the long hallways.

The Yellow Emperor was currently considered the most ancient of China's dynastic rulers preceding the Shang Dynasty, hailing from the mythological era of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors.

Five thousand years before the present, the Yellow Emperor give birth to Chinese culture and civilization, invented sailing, the wheel, musical instruments, the ten "stems" and twelve "branches" of the Chinese zodiacal calendar, and discovered a system of medical treatment using the *qi* pathways, recorded in a book known as the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*.

It was said that when he met the strongest of the opposing tribes in battle, led by the legendary "Flame Emperor," weapons called "pestles" flew through the air and exploded on contact in the enemy camps, killing and wounding scores at once.

In order to defend against these attacks, the Yellow Emperor had

his armies build ramparts miles into the sky. Although they began by simply piling earth and stone atop each other, the Yellow Emperor imbued these earthworks with the rigidity of an iron wall using bands of rough cotton provided by Qibo, the mythological doctor employed by the Yellow Emperor as his minister.

According to volume thirty-nine of the *Canon*, these bands were divided into fifty-five varieties, ranging from six inches to hundreds of yards wide. Steeped in a special chemical bath, they imbued the most brittle objects with adamantine strength.

The high technology, used on one hand to mend broken bones and on the other to construct cities, died with the Yellow Emperor. And yet here it was in the basement of a house in Takada no Baba, binding the feet of the great warlock.

"That bitch—" He ground his teeth. Not even his *qi* cannon could break through the impenetrably hard seal of the Yellow Emperor. "I'm powerless by myself. And while I sit here doing nothing, midnight approaches."

He brooded darkly on his predicament. His spirits lifted almost immediately. His downcast face smiled broadly. An idea popped into his head, along with the name of the person who could cut through this Gordian Knot.

"Ryuuki, you are surely around here somewhere."

Chapter Two

Setsura lifted his head. White light suffused the world around him. There was no night here. He had to rely on his internal clock. And that told him it was ten to midnight.

"The lady is indefatigable. She should be dropping by again anytime now."

His voice devoid of vim or vigor, he stared at the calm water and the peaceful sky. He was stretched out on a small boat floating in the lake. The craft was equipped with a bed for two, though Takako wasn't there. Because the Demon Princess had left with her.

Though she had promised not to take the last drop of her blood, Setsura was hardly willing to take her at her word. But neither did he have the means of stopping her.

The light wavered above his head and shattered into a thousand drops that reassembled in human form, as if the brilliant shades and colors were inherent in the light itself.

"Tonight is the fourth night."

The Demon Princess smiled brightly. The long robe wrapped around her like a rainbow was touched by not a single drop of water. She must have flown here through the air. This was perhaps the same brutal smile that had destroyed three dynasties and consigned millions to a dusty death.

"You're incorrigible," Setsura said, scratching around his collar.

“Call it my trademark. Make thousands cling to a red-hot iron shaft, slice open the bellies of tens of thousands of pregnant women, and I’m still game for more.”

“I can’t say I’ve heard a stranger boast. I assume Kanan-san is unharmed?”

“You should care for the condition of your own body more than that girl’s.”

“Oh, shut up,” he said, waving his hand at her with a dismissive gesture, a hand that looked like a piece of sculpture stolen from Madame Tussauds.

“Hoh. So those mortal ambitions are still alive in you. All the better. I’ll drink from you as is. Once you become my servant, all that malice and loathing will persist. You will mourn your outcast state, and that anguish will fill my heart.”

“You don’t have to be such an ass about it,” Setsura said, lying on his back on the bed.

The dazzling waves of color swept across him as Princess covered his body with her own. Her pale fingers undid his collar. Directly above his carotid artery on the left side of his neck, the two small red holes opened up.

Her hot breath and red lips caressed the skin around them. Setsura, the beautiful genie, was being devoured by this creature from hell. Whatever his sacrifice in order to save Takako, that accursed star that Kikiou saw had now fallen to earth.

Three nights had passed since that first encounter, making this

night her fourth feeding. And Setsura had run out of recourses. Takako was being held hostage. When, after the first kiss, he demanded that Takako be set free, Princess told him to stop talking such rubbish.

“If I returned that girl to you now, you would hunt me for the rest of your life. Another three days must pass until you are my servant completely. A little patience.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Hardly. I have never done it with a man so cool and collected as you. Perhaps that explains this sense of obsession. But don’t worry. I won’t lay a finger on her. When you become my servant, I will send her forth. Although that city now is a much more *energetic* place than here.”

The two streams of blood trickling from Setsura’s neck shone in her crimson eyes. Tonight was the last time she would take his blood. From tomorrow evening on, the black and white pair of silhouettes would wander through the beloved darkness.

And so she did not sate her hunger all at once. She pressed her bountiful breasts against his chest, her thighs snaked around his waist. Her slender finger touched his face. And when he pulled away —

“Oh? You find that disagreeable? So you should. As long as the girl is within my grasp. No, crossing that third threshold and receiving that third kiss, you will be fated to venture eternally into the night, with me by your side.”

“Not a chance.”

An object from the overhanging cliff was drawn silently into Setsura’s hand. A wind-tossed leaf.

“Little by little, this Potemkin Village is falling apart. Look—”

He held the leaf up before her eyes. It had already lost its vibrant color and changed into milky-white flake. A waxwork leaf, or rather one carved out of ivory.

“That, too,” Setsura said with a lazy wave of his hand. A fish leapt from the water, was split lengthwise, and in a flash turned into a weird kind of ivory vivisection, the fine bones of its skeleton like an intricate carving.

“And this one.”

This time he flung his devil wires between a distant stand of trees, cutting in half what appeared to be a tapir. The result was the same.

“How about them?”

His devil wires slashed through the waves on the lake, casting the triangular whitecaps into the water like chunks of white marble.

“If you’re in the mood, we can try the sun and the light and the wind. This is the true face of your world. And this is where you will continue to live?”

“This world will do as well as any other. As long as there is a night, I will continue to live. I could happily spend my lifetime living out of that casket.”

“I don’t plan on joining you,” Setsura promised. “First of all, how can you spend a *lifetime* if you don’t plan on dying?”

“Exactly. And you’ll know the feeling soon.”

“I hope not.”

“A little late to start complaining now. You are my servant.”

“That gets old, you know? Quit crowding me.”

He shooed her away, but Princess was already on top of him, her ardor inexorably rising up. Anybody chancing upon the scene would have taken them for lovers. Except it wasn’t his metaphysical heart at stake, and not even his life, but his very soul.

With Takako as hostage and Princess on the prowl for blood, there wasn’t much else he could do.

Fragrant breath tickled his nostrils. Her red lips touched his chin. The sky was as blue as the day of creation. Sunlight and wind filled the seemingly infinite space. The dreadful circumstances aside, this was a backdrop perfectly befitting the countenances of this young man and woman, a love scene to steal the breath away.

“Now is the time for you to become mine, my beloved man.” Her sultry voice wafted up from his neck.

In that moment, heaven and hearth shook.

A single black dot blossomed in the sky and covered the world, as if this world were a stage and the stage lights were suddenly dimmed. Ten-foot waves kicked up. The boat tossed and turned. The waves broke.

“What’s going on?” Princess gripped the side of the boat, her eyes shining.

“That’s what I want to know,” Setsura said. He was no longer

calm, cool and collected. Due to the bloodletting, his physical strength had reached its limits.

The small boat bobbed in the rough seas like a leaf in a waterfall as waves the size of small mountains beat against the gunwales. As it danced up and down, Setsura cast off without a second thought.

Two pale hands latched onto his shoulders. “What a troublesome man you are,” she grumbled as they flew through the gray skies.

“I don’t recall anybody asking me to save them. Let go.”

He tried to shrug her off but lacked the strength to make a convincing effort, and could only hang there limply. Princess skimmed across the waves and climbed into the sky. A fierce gust caught them sideways and sent them spiraling down. She corrected her trajectory in time to shoot upwards to a dizzying height.

“Hoh! Take a look at this, Setsura! The end of this world. The Armageddon promised by the prophets has arrived.”

“I’m not blind.”

The hint of pathos in his voice arose from something apart from simple fatigue. When the end of any world arrived, what words could possibly suffice?

Dark rivers of black mud assaulted the forests and the hills and the manor house. The lake spilled out of its banks. Mutant life forms squirmed from the plains to the mountains. Giant snakes writhed in the black waters.

The beautiful silhouettes glittered in the sky. Thousands of

lightning strikes shattered the peaks of the blue mountains, cleaving off the cliffs, sending them crashing down on the fleeing animals.

Fires erupted in the forest. The torrential rain only seemed to spread the flames. But the end was coming faster than the inferno could consume the world.

Setsura dodged between the shards of ivory lightning. The thunder died away. All movement ceased. The animals and forests and lakes and the manor house were surely seeing dreams carved in ivory.

He reached out and grasped a solidified white dove immediately to his left. Wings spread wide, the bird floating in the air swept easily into his hand, without him resorting to wires or weapons.

“What are you going to do after this?”

He grasped each wing in order—intricately carved, to the soft down of each feather—between his fingers and waved it back and forth.

Princess shook her head. “I don’t know. Kikiou made this world. Ask him.”

“Where is he?”

“Must still be outside.”

“Give him a call. No matter who you are, lose the world you’re attached to and there’s no place else you can go.”

“Oh? So now you’re concerned for my well-being?”

“I’m stuck here too, you know,” he shot back. Followed by a

startled look.

“Hey, even the wind is solidifying.”

“I know that.”

Princess’s eyes filled with an eerie light. If the wind could turn to ivory, then so could the air. There was no telling what would happen to these two next as they flew through the air like a pair of dazzling, demonic angels.

The most beautiful pair of eyes in the world focused on the mechanism, sitting there like a silent, black lump of parts.

“What do you think?” Tonbeau Nuvenberg asked.

“It’s been tampered with,” said the lord of the Resurrection Room, Doctor Mephisto.

“Kikiou?”

“So it would seem.”

Mephisto’s confidence was not mistaken.

“What a pain in the ass that old geezer is. The next time our paths cross, I’m giving him a piece of my mind.” She pressed her sausage-like lips together and delivered several karate chops to the air with her hand. When she’d calmed down a bit, she said, “What are you looking at?”

“There’s a woman here in Shinjuku you remind me of. An information broker.”

“Oh, well, she must be a real piece of work then.”

“That she is indeed.”

Tonbeau nodded contentedly, then said in a flurry, “What about Setsura?”

“That world has separated from the nexus and I have attempted to reestablish a connection. But there’s been outside interference. That world is—”

The smooth flow of his words came to an abrupt halt. A cold chill ran through Tonbeau’s body. “What’s become of it?”

Mephisto didn’t answer. With a wave of his right hand, the particles floating in the air solidified into a projected image. “Ah!” exclaimed Tonbeau. They were looking at the director’s office of Mephisto Hospital. Two pairs of eyes were drawn inexorably to the object lying akilter on the floor.

“That’s—that’s the box! And the lid—!”

The lid was open. It had fallen into the wooden box.

“Just barely managed to get it back.”

Not listening to him, Tonbeau ran for the door. “What are you doing? Hurry up and examine what’s inside! It’s gotta be worth a fortune!”

Paying no attention to the big woman galloping out of the room, Mephisto examined the image hovering in the air.

“It’s back, but where are the contents?”

Exactly as he’d observed, when Tonbeau barged into the director’s office—that hardly anybody was allowed into or even

knew where it was—this very powerful witch stared inside the box and shouted in surprise.

She said to Mephisto, a few steps behind her, “How do you explain this?” And thrust the wooden box in his face.

The box wasn’t empty. When Tonbeau had calmed down, Doctor Mephisto reached out and took the milky-white lump out of the box and set it on the table.

From its shape and size, everything was a half of itself, a bas-relief. The fine details were amazing, breathtaking. It was a garden carved in ivory. No, far more than any sculpture, it was imbued with the look and feel of an entire world—the lake brimming with water, the green woods and verdant forests, the blue mountains—

Every last one of them revealing only half of what it was. And yet Doctor Mephisto could *feel* the blue sky enclosing that world like a dome, just as Tonbeau Nuvenberg could *see* the white clouds floating through it.

The delicacy of the whitecaps on the lake, the boldness and ferocity of the animals peeking out from the trees in the forest—the sharpness of each cross-section, neatly divided down the middle, was rendered with such perfection as to suggest the work of an artist who’d sold his soul to the devil to achieve it.

The history of ivory carving in China was said to have begun in the Ming Dynasty. Up till then, bamboo had been the standard material. One of the prized items in the collection of the National Palace Museum was an ivory carving known as the “Dragon Boat.”

The length, width and height came to a mere two-point-five by three-quarters by one-point-five inches. The tiny vessel was equipped with paddles and oarlocks, masts and rigging, pagoda-like decks and staterooms. The miniature windows could be opened and closed.

Approaching the ideal of a "world in a box" was a Huang Zhen Xiao ivory landscape from the Middle Qing Dynasty. The sculpture, rendered from a single tusk, created the illusion of sublime mountain ranges far in the distance, men fishing in the lakes dotting the foothills, animals frolicking in the fields. people lounging in gazebos and teahouses hidden within the stands of pine, bamboo, and plum.

An unbounded world that could be contained in the palm of the hand. Except even those treasures were crude facsimiles compared to what had appeared before the eyes of these two wizards.

"There's no manor house," said Mephisto. "And no boat. They must have disappeared somewhere."

"The boat sank."

Tonbeau Nuvenberg pointed to a single point among the cresting whitecaps. A thin dark line, a shadow painted with India ink beneath the water's surface.

"One of the waves is severed. That slit is not supposed to be there. The only person who could have put it there is—"

"Setsura Aki."

He spared no praise for Tonbeau Nuvenberg's eyesight, able to

discern a single imperfection from the sea of waves rising the barest fraction of an inch above the surface, and instead stared off into space.

“Where is the other half of your world, Setsura?”

Chapter Three

A police helicopter was the first to notice the anomaly. They radioed in a report on a secured channel, but didn't spot any patrol cars answering the call. The night belonged instead to the citizens of the city roaming the streets sporting glowing red eyes and white fangs.

Instead, a second helicopter was dispatched to the scene. Upon seeing it himself, the startled chief broadcast a live feed to the mayor's office in the ward government building.

"Holy—!" As he could have predicted, Kajiwara jumped out of his chair.

On the screen was a majestic view of the Keio Plaza Hotel. Zooming in on the front lobby revealed a boat sitting there as if waiting to be ushered in. It appeared for all the world to be an antique vessel of Chinese design.

There was nothing all that strange about an ancient galley showing up in the ruins of an ultramodern hotel in this city. At this point in time though, confirming the whereabouts of any ancient Chinese vehicle was of the gravest importance.

Feeling the blood rush to his head, "Destroy that ship!" Kajiwara shouted.

"Roger," agreed the captain, though not in a manner that suggested the mayor was listening in. The command authority vis-à-

vis the patrol helicopters rested with him. With a few additions to the mayor's remarks, he relayed the information to the pilot.

"Roger that."

The helicopter put another two hundred yards between itself and the boat and armed the pair of TOW missiles on board. The one on the right was loaded with napalm, which should be more effective against a wooden structure.

"If anybody is in that boat, come out or we'll fire!" he announced through the external loudspeakers. "The state this city is in, we're not coming down to escort you out! If you can't move, then say something. If you don't intend to resist, let's see your hands. Or hit the hull three times. Our sensors will pick it up. You got ten seconds! After that we'll fire!"

He repeated the warning and counted down. The life forms squirming through the darkness froze in anticipation. The count started at ten. When it reached three, an invisible surge of power rose up from below and struck the helicopter.

"We're losing thrust!" the three man crew shouted together. The gunner peeled his eyes. "What's causing it?"

"No damned idea! We're going to crash at this rate. Fire!"

"I can't! The guidance controls are locked! We're going down!"

The rotors kept turning the ten yards more to the ground as much out of sheer willpower as luck. The helicopter stayed in one piece and the crew piled out, slapping their heads and chests to make sure their bodies had too. Directly in front of them, gray men blocked the

way.

"Who the hell are you?"

Within the group, one conspicuously tall man stopped forward. "We are former residents of the Toyama housing project. We're asking you to not make the same mistake twice. We would like to see them all writhing in the fires of hell as well. But wait a while longer. There may be passengers on board of incomparable value to you and ourselves."

"Toyama?" one of the helicopter crew exclaimed, his voice rising half an octave. The man's quiet but forceful presence engendered both relief and apprehension. "You're one of them!"

He had already drawn his Magnum sidearm. The moment his finger applied pressure to the trigger, the five-pound weapon slipped from his hand like it weighed a ton.

"What are you stopping us for?" This time, it was the gunner's assault that was brought to a halt. "What's your deal? You gonna save whoever's in that ship?"

"If there's anybody there."

"Fine. Then get on with us. But remember who's the law here. We're coming with."

"No objections here," the young man said with a generous nod. "However, things could get dangerous. We won't be watching your backs."

"You don't have to tell us. But if we all get out of this alive,

you'll be getting a bill for the helicopter."

The gunner thumbed his lapel mike and said, "Like you heard. We're going inside the ship. We'll keep broadcasting, but there's no telling what will get through." He adjusted his helmet camera and said, "What's your name?"

"Yakou."

"I'm Hayata. Nice meeting you."

The deck of the ship was ten feet above their heads. There were no handholds. Hayata glanced back at the helicopter. "We've got rocket belts in there."

A black-clad arm wrapped around his waist. "And I've got room for one more," Yakou said.

Another of the gray silhouettes stepped forward and stood opposite Hayata. He didn't have the time to wonder what was going to happen next when the three of them soared into the air.

To the rest of the helicopter crew on the ground, the wings that unfolded from Yakou's back as he launched into the air brought to mind fairytale images of a demonic angel.

They watched them disappear above the deck of the ship, only turning around when one of the gray men ominously raised his voice.

"They're coming."

From far off in the inky darkness surrounding them burned the fiery red dots. The citizens of Shinjuku on the prowl for fresh victims to feed their second lives.

The three on the deck of the ship hadn't the time to consider the fates of their colleagues. They landed on the stern. The black hatchway gaped open, beckoning them into the ship's interior.

The deck, gunwales, masts and railings were lavished with glittering golden birds of prey, landscapes of hills and rivers. A bronze lamp still burned in the wheel cabin. This wasn't a houseboat, but a pleasure craft for enjoying a misty spring moon while sharing a bottle of sake.

They descended a stairway, Yakou leading the way. At the foot of the stairs, a door rose up before them, walls to the left and right.

Watching as Yakou placed his hand on the latch, Hayata tightened his grip on the Magnum.

Light poured out like a swift-moving stream. For some reason, Hayata comprehended that this was the light of spring, the particles of light swirling around them before Yakou had swung the door all the way open.

Yakou may have hesitated at that moment, and Hayata pushed past him.

They were standing on the edge of a field. Not quite yet summer, springtime was fully in its glory. The blooming flowers basking in the radiant glow, their refreshing scent suffusing the languid breezes.

"Setsura Aki."

The graceful form lay next to the trunk of a peach tree on a bed of green grass, covered with a blanket of white flowers. A rainbow-colored sprite danced next to him. No one could have imagined that

this was the very incarnation of death and destruction.

Her lithesome, outstretched arms drew the light to her. Her feet treading on the ground brought forth the rich smell of the earth. Her fragrance was the light and the light became her fragrance, twining with the falling blossoms, forming a prismatic rainbow arcing through the sky.

The angel of death dancing to the song of life.

Yakou stood there in stunned silence. 'Nice that you showed up," the voice sang out to him. "That face, those eyes—I see I can no longer call you my servant. But I won't be handing Setsura over to you."

All at once, his one crucial task denied to him, Yakou felt his spirits fall.

"Oh, don't worry. I have not yet made him my own. Once more is all it takes. You understand the meaning of that, don't you? This is my dance of celebration. Instead of Setsura, you may take that woman. Do not draw any conclusions of your own from this, simply know that that is why I invited you here."

Yakou saw Takako Kanan lying at his feet. He picked her up and passed her to his subordinate. "Go," he said.

"But—"

"Wait on the deck of the ship."

The subordinate nodded and left.

"Is she the bad guy here?" Hayata asked.

“Exactly.”

“She’s a babe. What do we do?”

“Kill her. Here and now.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Hayata raised his fifty caliber auto, aimed it at Yakou’s back and squeezed the trigger. The thunderous reports ruptured the stillness of the spring day. His back arched, Yakou whirled around.

Twelve spent casings fell glittering onto the grass. Hayata tossed the gun away and wiped the drool from his mouth. The high-powered gun that could stop a mad bull in its tracks should have turned Yakou’s torso into a sieve. Seemingly oblivious to the fact that Yakou was still standing there impassively, he tottered up to the beautiful dancing Princess.

He was not under the spell of the Demon Princess. Or rather, it was her dancing alone that intoxicated his senses. The iron will of a cop who cruised daily through the carnage of Demon City melted like warm putty at the sight of her willowy limbs and transfixing countenance.

“Make me your servant—”

Her pale hands flitted like swallows before his empty face. Then beside the dancing Princess stood a torso and a head flying into the air, connected by a tide of blood. The tide became a mist carried by the wind and washed over Yakou as Hayata’s head thumped as well to the ground.

“What’s the matter? Can’t come any closer?”

The rainbow danced on and the ominous taunt rang out, oblivious to the macabre scene.

Yakou couldn’t budge. Not because of fear. An utterly unique look shone in his eyes, that no man had ever shown to Princess before.

“I believe you may have leapt to the wrong conclusion,” he said in a low voice.

“What would that be?”

“We are birds of a feather. And there are those other things too close to see. The emperors you drove mad, did you seduce them out of love?

“Well,” Princess said coldly. “They were all the same to me.”

She glared at Yakou, her eyes spilling forth a fearsome light. “I handed over the girl. All there is left for you to do is leave.”

“Then I’ll leave with Setsura Aki-san,” Yakou said with a ghostly smile, showing the confidence of a man who had led that band of vampires since olden times. Once in the skies above Chuo Park he had bowed down before Princess’s evil eye—there was that lingering anger too.

Lightning wouldn’t strike twice. Providing he was not caught off guard, even an immortal, four-thousand-year-old vampire princess could not easily escape his *qi* cannon.

He had put together a dedicated band of brothers to deal with the

creatures scattered across the Shinjuku night spawned by her. While preparing for the next encounter, a separate group arrived with news of the ship. This time, they would revenge themselves on the foe who killed the Elder and purge the humiliation of that defeat.

And yet Princess did not stop dancing, within the wind and light and peach blossoms, the symphony of spring. Far from being intimidated, she was hardly aware he was there. And far from being angered, Yakou was more taken aback.

Nevertheless, his hands shifted to a fighting stance, for he was the leader of the night dwellers. His hands reached out, spikes that could pierce a wall of steel. A silent, shapeless shaft of energy poured from his fingertips and shot towards the rainbow dancer.

In the multicolored kaleidoscope, a golden point of light flared up. And disappeared. One after the other, sparkling dots of light were absorbed into her body.

The Demon Princess raised her hand to her mouth and made a fist. Pursing her lips, she unfurled her fingers. Propelled by her breath, the peach blossoms wound around the trajectory of Yakou's *qi* cannon and covered his face.

Yakou reeled back with a moan, his eyelids white, his eyes sealed by the blinders of white petals.

"If you cannot destroy me, you cannot remove that. So, Yakou, what do you think of your veil of darkness now?"

"I think this."

Princess hadn't expected that answer or his subsequent flight

into the air. His face rendered expressionless, the winged figure rose elegantly above her and flitted off toward the far spring meadows.

"Bastard."

In contrast to her execrations, with movements that did not disturb at all the flow of her dance up till then, Princess waved her hands. The sleeve of her gown sprang into the air like a flying fish and chased after him. Oblivious to the streamers hot on his heels, from the air Yakou thrust down his hands at a point below him.

"I found what I'm looking for, Princess."

What had he seen with his unseeing eyes? What he had probably already sensed in the midst of the battle, using those senses that both he and Princess shared as creatures of the night.

Black splinter fragments erupted from the undergrowth as the multicolored band wrapped around his body. He heard the bones of his body breaking. Plunging abruptly toward the ground, what he felt was not pain. An intoxicating sensation coursed through the marrow of his bones and raced through his veins.

He could die like this. At that moment, the immortal young man longed for death.

Princess's voice echoed in his ears from far away. "Emperor Zhou and Emperor Jie died the same way, the pain piercing their flesh and bones turning into tears of ecstasy. You are the Elder's grandson. The least I can do is indulge you no differently than I would a king. You should taste the bitter fruits of an undying body all over again."

Yakou was already writhing on the ground. The sunlight shone

down on the trampled grass. He watched the demonic fairy floating though the spring dancing her eerie dance. The grass danced, the blood danced. Broken bones pierced his chest and viscera.

"How fare your heart and lungs? Ah, stabbed through and through. But your bones won't kill you. The closer you get to death, the greater the pleasure you will feel. The dance is over. What do you say I assist you in these throes of bliss?"

She licked her lips, stopped dancing, and walked over to stand next to Yakou. With a lewd glance at his crotch, she knelt down. The mere touch of her hand drew from Yakou a low moan. The waves of unbearable pleasure pushed him inexorably toward climax. He did not right now possess the force of will to resist.

Using her forefinger like a stiletto, she slit his slacks in two. As if released from impatient seclusion, his member sprang toward the sky.

"Though I can't so easily destroy you, I can drive you mad. Yakou, you will thank your stars for the time you stay sane."

This woman, whose beauty like her evil knew no end, and yet might easily be mistaken for a heavenly nymph, wrapped her red lips around his aroused manhood.

Yakou twisted his body but he could not resist. His body could only move reflexively to the stimulus. She went down on him hard, and he came in her mouth. However pleasurable the sensation might be, all emotion vanished from his pale face. As if the wellspring of that pleasure itself had taken form within him, his vacant eyes froze in their sockets.

She pulled her moist mouth away and swallowed. Her throat quivered. “Once more,” she exulted. “Once more and Setsura becomes mine and you go out of your mind. Well then, who gets to go first? Who gets to watch? Of course, let’s start with you.”

Once again she lowered her debauched lips to him.

A sudden disturbance marred the quiet stillness of the spring day. With a start she spun around. A bright red line circumscribed her neck. Her head slid to the side. She raised an arm and returned it to its rightful place.

“You’ve woken up, Setsura?” Her indescribable voice carried on a fitful breeze toward the dark silhouette who stood beneath the distant peach tree. “No—you are—different. But the same Setsura. The man who once divided me in two.”

“You have met *me*, Princess,” he said, his countenance as cool and pale as the peach blossoms dancing and twirling before his eyes.

Part Seventeen: The Funeral Bell

Chapter One

The two silhouettes stood on the sun-drenched spring field like twin columns of white and black smoke. A hundred and fifty feet separated them. In another place and time, the tension between them might have suggested that they'd be rushing into each other's embrace at any moment.

And yet tying these two "lovers" together was not a cord of yearning and affection, but the remorseless lash of death.

"Takako's other half cast aside the *you* that quenched my thirst. *You*, though, are different. How did you escape my spell?"

"Well, now." Only Setsura's mouth moved. "Because the one you bit was not *me*."

"The man who is *me* but not *me*. A man is who he is, but you are not. No matter who you are, your fate remains the same. Come."

Without the slightest trepidation, Princess raised her right hand and beckoned to him. A moment later, those fingers popped off her hand and dropped to the ground.

"Hoh. So that's how you want to do it?"

She bent over and plucked up the digits with her left hand. With a single touch, the fingers attached to their stumps and flexed as they should, not a scar left behind.

"But it won't do you any good."

The Demon Princess grinned, showing her white teeth. But then she again cast down her eyes. Red lines welled up. The fingers again dropped off. The stubs showing again, Princess pressed her palm against the side of her neck. Blood oozed from around her hand.

"That's right," Princess said, a smile in her voice. "You cut me once before. Now you have done it again. That is unforgiveable. You alone I will send to hell."

A flood of blood gushed from her neck as she spoke, staining the sunlight red, the blood red tide closing out the heavens and the earth.

A few moments later, a single presence fluttered within that world.

"Hoh!"

Accompanying the surprised exclamation, the bloody mist cleared away like a raised curtain. Princess stood alone on the green field, as if embossed by the sunlight pouring down. In her hand was the jet-black slicker.

"He ran away."

She glanced around her, and then down at her gown, dripping with blood. He had not only fixed her attention on the slicker like showing a red cape to a bull, but had succeeded in fleeing with Yakou as well.

"Setsura, you cut me not once but twice, and then deceived my very eyes. You cannot hide from me. You have received my third kiss. No matter where you go, I will be there with you."

Her white hand gripped the black coat. Like it had been left soaking in water, red blood squeezed out of her hand and rained onto the grass.

Strange shadows crawled along every street and avenue. Above the heads of these creatures, who now claimed hegemony over the day, a shadow darker than the night flitted through the sky, beautiful and bewitching, and set down where the Oume Road changed to Yasukuni Avenue.

The shadow set down beneath the central Shinjuku overpass.

It seemed less intentional than on purpose. The shadow didn't rise immediately to his feet, but rested there on one knee. Still bearing Yakou on his back, Setsura let out a long breath.

That breath was mingled with blood, but not from his mouth. His hands and face were speckled with a myriad of red dots—from the mist that had erupted around him. The greater amount, though, welled up from the pores of his skin.

In the boat sitting in front of the Keio Plaza Hotel lobby, Princess was wringing out his coat.

"That's what four thousand—no, add in the legendary dynasties and make it six thousand—years of Chinese history will get you. She sure doesn't make it easy."

He came unsteadily to his feet like a marionette whose strings had been cut. Blood dripped from his face like sweat. His pale and waxy countenance suggested he hardly had that much left inside him.

He looked back at the skyscrapers behind him and said, “She’s definitely coming. We’ve hardened the defenses, but getting back to Mephisto Hospital will be no walk in the park.”

This was no casual recollection about navigating the city at night. On the streets around them, the ruby pearls of red light inexorably pressed through the darkness.

As the bird flew, it was less than two hundred yards from the intersection beneath the Shinjuku overpass to Mephisto Hospital. No two ways about it, that was going to be a very long two hundred yards.

“You’re not one of us.” From among the assembled throng, at least a hundred strong, came a woman’s derisive voice. “So give us your blood.”

“Now.”

“I’m so damned thirsty I could die.”

Setsura jumped over his head. He wrapped a strand of devil wire around a guardrail on the overpass and swung past the band of vampires. Landing on Yasukuni Avenue a dozen feet behind them, he looked around.

“She’s here.”

More of Shinjuku’s citizens ran like nimble beasts towards them. Setsura turned his attention toward the overpass as Princess came sailing above it.

She landed not ten feet behind him. “I thought you would have

already made your escape." Her voice rang out though the night like a silver bell. "Still playing your little tricks."

She reached her hand to her white throat and sharply pulled it away. An invisible wire tore from within the white flesh. Not just one. Her whole body glittered in the moonlight as she cast off the thousands of wires biting into her body.

It was a long way from *here* to *there*, Setsura had said. But simply getting *here* Princess turned her body into a human porcupine, minced and mangled, enduring the pains of hell. All inflicted by the defensive web of titanium wires Setsura had strewn across the roadway.

"Get back!"

As soon as she took another step, several of the vampires looking on rushed at her. Without saying a word, Princess parted the air with a slash of her hand. The headless torsos crashed together before her while the soaring heads stared into each other's eyes.

"Fools! Why are you—"

Her lips twisted in derision. More men and women charged her from the rear. These were the vampires that had surrounded Setsura on the intersection below. No sooner had she beheaded them but another throng converged, a wall of Shinjuku's citizens forming around her.

"Setsura—damn you—-"

The Demon Princess had already discerned between action and intent. From the reactions of the people pressing toward her, they

were not obstructing her path of their own free will, but at Setsura's bidding.

She tried to jump free. Hands grabbed at her hair, her shoulders, her gown.

Princess drank blood and made men her slaves. Setsura bound them with his devil wires, manipulating not only their bodies but their decaying nervous systems that could make a dead man walk, transforming the hordes of servants she had brought forth into his staunchest allies.

Observing Setsura staggering away beyond the wave of inhumanity engulfing her, Princess rose up in a rage. She twirled her body like a twister, with a sound like the darkness itself tearing apart. Her gorgeous body rose high into the air.

Setsura and Yakou had reached the Mermaid game center. As far as Princess was concerned, practically a hand's breadth away. She fixed her eyes upon them, like an eagle casting a pitying downward glance at some small stupid creature crawling along the ground. And was about to swoop in for the kill when a pair of black wings flapped across her face.

With a speed and dexterity no normal person could hope to achieve, she evaded the stabbing beaks and crushed them and tossed them aside.

For a brief moment, the black wings and cawing beaks obscured her sight. From before it became Demon City, Shinjuku had been home to droves of the big, spooky, garbage-feeding crows. Their numbers had hardly diminished since, and their natures had grown

all the more bold and frenzied.

Moreover, when they set out hunting before the light of dawn, pedestrians, vagrants, ghosts and goblins of all sorts hid while these black-winged air corps ruled the sky.

A while back, the ward government had investigated the natures of these birds by sacrificing a bull to their ravenous appetites. Left on Yasukuni Avenue as the darkness closed in, the half-ton animal was pecked apart, devoured down to its entrails in less than thirty seconds, leaving only a pile of bones behind.

That they were now blocking Princess's pursuit of Setsura must be sheer coincidence. However, knowing their traits and idiosyncrasies as he did, he couldn't help believing that this time they'd stepped in to pitch-hit for him.

Though their time at bat was short.

A red glow glimmered inside the swirl of black feathers. Princess's eyes. As soon as that light burned into the eyes of the crows, they whirled about and plummeted at Setsura. Dispatching all of them with his devil wires would be no easy task.

But at the last moment the crows dove instead into the surface of the road, raising a gory splash of feathers and black blood.

Setsura stopped and looked at his savior, standing in front of the Shinseido Music Emporium.

Princess alit on the ground a few seconds later. Recognizing the man who had caused the obstruction, she grinned. "Ah, of course. So it seems we are tied together by those invisible threads, eh

Ryuuki?”

Standing next to the hauntingly smiling Kikiou, the stouthearted statue of a man silently fixed his eyes on Setsura.

Chapter Two

"What are you up to, Kikiou?" the Demon Princess said, shifting her gaze away from Setsura. Her voice might even be described as gentle, which made it all the more menacing.

"In fact, I have been spending considerable time constructing a means of linking us back together."

The great warlock, though, appeared a little worried. After activating the Akashic Records in the Nuvenberg house, he had made his escape with Ryuuki. And then on an outdoor television screen, he'd caught news of the boat showing up and had run over as quickly as possible.

They broke through the Seal of the Yellow Emperor using Ryuuki's *qi* to get to the device. It was a miracle they'd been able to pull it off without the doll girl being any the wiser.

"Huh. So you're the one who destroyed our world." Her icy glare pierced him like knives. "Well, whatever. Given a thousand years, ten thousand years, you can make as many as you want. Let's get down to the business at hand. You got here just in time. I am granting you the opportunity to turn away from your apostasy and reclaim your fidelity. Ryuuki, seize Setsura and kill the man on his back."

"Understood." Kikiou nodded. He turned to Ryuuki and said, "Princess has spoken. The only reason you could have come this far is because you still desire to return to the service of one's master.

Now you must put it on display."

Ryuuki didn't react in the slightest. Several long seconds of silence passed. Then unexpectedly he said, "Setsura, are you going to release him?"

"No."

Though enemies before and behind him blocked the way, not a quaver of fear sounded in the word, despite a sense of the fatigue clearly being there.

"Why not? I have not been instructed to kill you. Discard him and run away and you will likely return home safe and sound."

"Would you?"

Ryuuki fell silent. Then answered with a thin smile, "I thought you would say that. Be on your way."

Next to him, Kikiou looked on disbelievingly, struck speechless at such a blatant display of betrayal. "You—You—You will disobey Princess?"

"I believe he just did," said Princess, closing her eyes as if she couldn't care less. "So what will you do, Kikiou?"

Setsura had already set off. He'd gotten ten yards and made a left at the intersection. Mephisto Hospital was only a stone's throw ahead.

"Princess, you can school Ryuuki afterwards. I will deal with Setsura now."

Kikiou reared back and took aim with his *qi* cannon. As if

materializing out of nowhere, the red-eyed throng froze on the spot. They had felt that demonic vibe beyond human ken, with no idea what would happen next.

The wave warped the air and ran after Setsura—and suddenly disappeared. At the same time, the old man was torn from his left shoulder to his right waist.

Setsura's devil wire. But how had he negated the effect of Kikiou's attack?

"Ryuuki—Ryuuki—you traitor!" Kikiou hissed, looking and sounding like an ill-mannered ogre.

General Ryuuki had interposed himself between Setsura and Kikiou and Princess, as if protecting him.

"Explain yourself, Ryuuki," Princess quietly said.

"At a certain time, in a certain place, I learned the joy of coming to the rescue of another. That is your answer."

He seemed to tower above them, the ghost koto *Silent Night* strapped to his back.

An eerie light filled Princess's eyes. "What an adorable answer. I've thought that perhaps since I saved your life at the border of the wastelands once I might hear you say the same thing. But it was not immediately forthcoming, General Ryuuki."

"Please forgive me, Princess."

"No, I don't think I will. Look, Setsura has turned the corner. If he gets into Mephisto Hospital, I won't easily get him out again.

That is all on *you*. It's been a long and winding road, Ryuuki."

For all the sentiment in the words, there was no emotion in her voice. She strode up to Ryuuki. No less amazed by her casual manner, Kikiou was about to jump back.

General Ryuuki stood there like a statue, his face no more revealing his thoughts than a piece of stone. The Demon Princess stopped in front of him and reached out, her left arm parallel to the ground.

The slender hand pierced the right side of Ryuuki's chest with no more difficulty than plunging it into warm water. In light of the relationship between them, and taking into consideration his own long years, the impression this scene left upon him could not be any more profound.

Gazing at Ryuuki's tortured mien, Princess inserted her right hand to the wrist and slowly churned it back and forth, massaging the flesh. Blood brimmed up. Not a drop fell to the ground.

"What do you say, Ryuuki? No matter how difficult, I will chase him down and bring him back." The sound of her voice grew muffled. Her lips pressed against Ryuuki's chest, sucking up the trickle of blood. "I changed my mind. You need to live a little bit longer. Doctor Mephisto is in his hospital, you see. He is the man whose blood you drank. I am your sire, and he should obey my commands, though he is a most unreliable servant. Live your limited life for a while longer. When you have used him to deliver Setsura into my hands, these arms of mine will pluck out your true heart."

"No." He spoke with the low voice of a dead man, though the

word was laced with shining steel.

"No?"

"That young man will never become your servant. In this corrupt and fallen city, he is the manifestation of the freedom of a soaring cloud, the unrestraint of a whispering wind. I wish to be like that as well."

"Hoh. Then what will you do?" Her hand still connected her to Ryuuki's chest.

"To turn such a man over to you would be the same as prostrating myself at your feet." Ryuuki's face was exceedingly calm. "You mean, will I once again choose to live out the endless days at your side? No. And neither will I help you capture Setsura Aki."

"Then I will go after them myself."

"Suit yourself. As for me—"

In that moment, Ryuuki's body unsheathed itself from Princess's hand and flew backwards a dozen feet.

"Will you betray me, Ryuuki?"

A quiet power suffused Princess's voice, became a luminous point of golden light that was drawn into the valley between her breasts. Trailing a rainbow behind her, she flitted over the general's head.

Just as a mask of gray dust blew against her face. "Shuuran!" Princess growled. "You are here too!"

The rending sound of flesh silenced that cry. All motion stopped.

In the center of the world, the two of them stood close enough to be locked in an embrace.

Princess's right hand had plunged through Ryuuki's chest.

There was no telling how much time passed until the world jerked back into motion. The mighty man fell to his knees and collapsed to the ground, rugged as the side of a mountain to the very end.

The strings of the koto hummed. The sad note stirred the air. The Demon Princess didn't move until it faded away.

She looked down at her bloody right hand and then at the body at her feet. "What a strange man," she said to Ryuuki. Her eyes obstructed by the dust that was Shuuran, he had taken the blow straight to the heart. *Silent Night* had given him sufficient opportunity to react.

The dust covering him like a protective blanket remained motionless as well. A gentle night wind swept them up and carried them together toward the west, to the land of the setting sun.

"What are we going to do, Princess?" said Kikiou.

"You would do well to ask that question of yourself."

Princess flicked her hands. Ryuuki's blood scattered onto the ground. Her hands gleamed white in the moonlight, as befitted their owner.

"I know what I am going to do. I am going to take possession of Setsura and grind him into the mud and make him my servant."

“And then?”

“Whatever. You got any good ideas?” she said with a dazzling smile. “Make your dreams come true. Stay here and bury the world with our minions. Travel off to some unknown country. Or sleep for an eternity in the casket in that ship. Take your pick.”

“Whichever you choose, you intend to bring Setsura along with you?”

“You think not?”

“No,” said Kikiou. Did the Demon Princess notice that when it came to Setsura, he answered the same as Ryuuki? “My divination has proved accurate. Setsura is our most unlucky star. Consider the proof. You killed Ryuuki and extinguished Shuuran. Will you destroy the world, leaving behind but a single boat? Make him your servant and the fate of that unlucky star changes not one whit. As long as he is by your side, none of our ambitions will come to fruition.”

“Those ambitions you speak of are all yours.”

Kikiou started at the cold edge to her words. “What—What are you saying? For the past four thousand years, our agreed-upon goal has been to fill the world with your kin, beginning with the accursed city as the cornerstone.”

“Really? We agreed on that? It slipped my mind.” Kikiou glared back at the moonlight-dappled face with the look of a man whose soul was dead. Princess paid it no mind and continued, “Our world or this world, whatever will be will be. As long as I can spend the

endless days doing whatever I want, I have no complaints. Who knows when it will end? That matters now only to the *two* of us."

"Then—Then as for *my* goals and desires?"

"You might want to give them a rest."

Kikiou froze. This was how the woman he'd spent four thousand years with bid the great warlock goodbye. He finally said, "How can you—this city will soon fall into the hands of your servants. The rest of the world will follow not long after. You will become their absolute monarch. Without you there to guide them, they will be reduced to nothing more than a disorganized rabble. What have we been working for all this time? Are you so willing to render it a meaningless waste?"

"I am absolutely willing. Shall we call it a day and go our separate ways? Kikiou, you can walk down whatever road and toward any horizon that meets your fancy."

Princess looked at the bend in the road in front of her, the intersection where Setsura turned off Yasukuni Avenue and was heading to the hospital where the white doctor ruled.

"I am not letting you get away, Setsura."

With four thousand years of her previous existence weighing upon those words, Princess set off without another look back.

That day, Mephisto Hospital had been visited by one unexpected patient after the next. First was Takako Kanan, borne there by Yakou's subordinates. An hour later came Yakou himself, carried in by Setsura. They were quickly admitted and taken to the director's

special examination room.

There to meet them were Doctor Mephisto and Tonbeau Nuvenberg.

Tonbeau had been raring to go as soon as she'd learned that an ancient Chinese ship had shown up at the Keio Plaza Hotel. Mephisto urged a wait and see attitude. She was certainly conspiring to use Mephisto's offices to wheedle more reward money from the mayor. The doctor didn't leap into action at once, pointing out that others had been engaged to investigate and they should await the enemy's next move.

A prudence, very much like him, that had perhaps been additionally affected by the blood of those interfering creatures of the night.

"You seem to be in one piece," he said to Setsura, lying on the bed. There was a different timbre to his voice as well, though only he and Setsura would ever have noticed.

"What about Kanan-san and Yakou?" Setsura asked, his face waxy and pale.

"They are in the next room. Miss Tonbeau is watching over Kanan-san. There's no need to worry."

"The enemy is those two," Setsura said coldly. "Bedding us down together like this, the security around here is going to the dogs." He looked up at Mephisto. "To make matters worse, you and they are probably still buds."

"Bridle such thoughts." Mephisto pulled over a chair, sat down,

and examined Setsura's neck. "You haven't used the bottle you were given?"

The bottle given him in Galeen Nuvenberg's house, back when she was still alive. Setsura had treated himself with it.

"I will drink it afterwards."

"How many times have you been bitten?"

Setsura held up three fingers.

"It might not be in time, then. You are a miser when it comes to deploying available resources."

"You don't have anything newer?"

"My knowledge reaches no further."

"Well, run a few trials to see whether it is still effective now that I have become that woman's slave."

"I am not compounding that medicine again. Drink up."

"Supposing I do, what about destroying that woman?"

"Such as driving a stake through her heart?"

"Do you think that would work?"

"No. Destroying Princess is impossible."

"Then what?"

"Hold off going anywhere and don't go anywhere by yourself. That woman is obsessed with you. Or to put it another way, refuse her and she might well wreck the world for spite." Mephisto waited

for a reaction from Setsura. When none was forthcoming, he said, "That woman is antimatter facing off against matter, a nihility facing off against existence itself. Any life that touches her ceases to be. There is no way to lay hands on her. Moreover—"

Sensing something in his voice, Setsura closed his eyes. "Don't carry on just like her, Mephisto. You are strangely like *me*. You have a grasp of the situation."

"Not at all." Mephisto's white face came within a hand's breadth of Setsura's nose.

"What are you doing?"

"I thought it time for a face-to-face talk."

"About treating me?"

"About treating my troubled heart."

"Get a freaking grip," Setsura said in a weary voice.

"Somebody commands me to."

A tense air, as lurid as it was sublime, filled the space between the two comely countenances. Mephisto suddenly pulled his face away. His hands flashed through the air, revealing a bespectacled man in a white lab coat, looking as long in the face as a man could.

"What is it, Takahashi-kun?"

"The patient has disappeared from the examination room."

"Takako Kanan?"

"Yes."

“What about her attendant?”

A black shadow slipped by Mephisto and headed to the door. With Mephisto at his heels, he sprinted to the next room.

The only person there was Tonbeau stretched out on the floor, snoring like a content hippo. She was sound asleep.

“*Silent Night*,” Setsura said, thinking of Ryuuki’s koto. “Does that mean Ryuuki’s shown up here?”

Doctor Takahashi soon ran in and dispelled that notion. A short time before, he’d ducked out to the back courtyard to take a breather, and spied there what he could only describe as the Goddess of the Moon. As soon as their eyes met, he lost consciousness. The woman had what looked like a koto in her hands.

He was only out for a moment, though when he checked his watch, ten minutes had passed. Recalling the beauty of the ghostly girl who had devastated the hospital previously, still in a mostly dazed state he had hurried to check Takako Kanan’s room.

“If that woman was playing the koto,” Setsura surmised, “then Ryuuki no longer lives.”

Mephisto didn’t contradict him, meaning he agreed. Setsura took a long breath and glared at Mephisto. “You would have known that Ryuuki was gone. Somebody commands you to, eh?”

“Let’s not bicker about who said what to whom,” said Mephisto, feigning utter innocence.

Setsura dropped the matter. He had other things to worry about.

No matter where Princess was, Takako would go to her when beckoned. And no matter where Takako was, Princess would know where to find her. She must have used *Silent Night* to keep interfering busybodies out of the way.

The video cameras observing Takako's room twenty-four seven were working normally. But none of them recorded Takako leaving the room. The dulcet tones of the ghost koto *Silent Night* had powerful directional abilities, or they would have put Setsura to sleep as well.

But why hadn't Princess summoned Setsura while she was at it? Because she wanted Setsura to come to her by his own choice, of his own free will. She was trying to arouse his concern for Takako and make him suffer—by stealing back the girl he'd only managed to rescue a few hours before.

He should not have experienced such levels of existential despair, like the condemned criminal who receives a last-minute reprieve as he sits in the electric chair, only to be ordered back as soon as he exits the execution room.

"Did you tie one of your threads to Kanan-san?"

"It broke. Did you inject her with a GPS device?"

"Settle down."

"You did? Where is she? That boat?"

"I did inject a tracer agent into her blood. But there's been no response."

Setsura was about to tear him a new one, but checked himself. A demonic aura emanated from the white doctor's being. Princess had spirited Takako away from *his* hospital.

"My commission hasn't ended. No, I shall give you a new one. Setsura, find out where Princess is."

"And in exchange, are you going to clean up the pieces when it's all over?"

"That is not my job," Mephisto said bluntly. "But the bill for violating the sanctity of my hospital on three separate occasions shall be paid. See that she falls from the heights of bliss to the depths of hell. All I desire is confirmation that it happened. And you need a blood transfusion."

"Promise that you don't spike it with anything funny."

"Your own blood. Synthetic, of course, but no different down to the DNA."

"Manufactured how?" asked Setsura. He watched as an automated gurney rolled up next to him.

"Utilizing *their* knowledge. They've succeeded in a number of other areas also. Let's go."

"If something turns up about that woman during the transfusion __"

"Nothing to worry about. It'll be over in thirty seconds."

Mephisto wasn't exaggerating on that score.

Chapter Three

Setsura spent the next three days spinning his wheels and getting nowhere.

The mayor and the chief of police urged that the boat in front of the Keio Plaza Hotel be incinerated. Doctor Mephisto managed to exert enough caution and warning for them to call it off.

The chief dispatched scouting parties to investigate the boat. Carrying stakes and peaches, heavily armed officers crept inside but found only what any sailor would expect to see in an old and decrepit vessel.

Where had Kikiou and the Demon Princess gone? And Takako?

Impatient concern darkened Setsura's fine features. During that time, rumors of a woman fitting Princess's description reached his ears only once.

A vagrant looking for a place to bed down near the Keio Plaza Hotel one night had seen the shining outlines of a beautiful woman on the roof, her long black hair and the hem of her shimmering gown fluttering in the wind. She was shedding flower petals of light. The vagrant couldn't take his eyes off of her.

What was she up to?

She was gazing down at the city, the vagrant said. That was all. No emotion of any sort rose to her beautiful face.

“Ain’t making any of this up,” the vagrant insisted. “The only thing I got going for me is these eyes. I can see anything in the dark. I didn’t see no anger or sadness or resentment or nothing. An expression like that, the exact opposite of beauty. Never seen anything like her in my life, but I got it, you know? Staring down at the city like an angel sitting up there in Heaven checking out us mortals. Feeling nothing. Just looking, like she ain’t felt no happiness and no grief since the day she was born.”

Princess got back in touch the night of the third day.

Setsura was lying on his bed when the call came from Mephisto over the hospital’s internal line, directing him to the front hallway. It was three in the morning.

Seeing the line of pale faces covered with the glass from the lobby doors, Setsura stopped in his tracks. Faces that must have been shoved through the glass until it shattered, more faces torn by the shards, other faces unscathed—and the eyes of all of them burning with a red flame, tongues licking over chattering fangs.

The same creatures of the night as the Toyama vampires, but a completely different species.

Spotting the hospital director standing in the center of the hallway, Setsura said, “What’s up, Doc?”

“They say they have something to say to you.”

“*Listen to me*.”

Setsura whirled around.

"*Takako and everything else I leave to you*."

Setsura turned and saw. Pressed against the windows, their lips moving, they were speaking Princess's words.

"*Tonight, soon, come alone to the roof of the Keio Plaza Hotel. You and nobody else*."

"I figured as much," Setsura said to Mephisto. "I'll be going then. Send me the bill."

"You think you can pull this off by yourself?"

The silver platter of the moon hovered above the heads of these creatures of the night.

"I'll think of something," Setsura answered airily.

"I figured you would say that."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that even you respond to a vampiric transformation no differently than any other normal human being."

Mephisto raised his hand and brushed it across his forehead and thrust his finger toward Setsura. Perched on the ball of his finger was a single drop of blood pierced by a single strand of hair.

The expression on Setsura's face abruptly changed. A dark shadow crossed his face, the product of an insatiable hunger.

"Close your mouth."

Responding to Mephisto's command, Setsura covered his mouth with his left hand. He couldn't hide the red light pouring from his

eyes.

“It figures,” Mephisto said, like a mathematician demonstrating the proof for a difficult equation. He pointed towards the lobby. “Get going. The darkness tonight is particularly deep. The night is your world now.”

Setsura headed for the door. As he left the building, the creatures waiting outside parted to the left and right, forming a clear path before him. Not just because Princess willed. There was in their eyes a strange kind of affection.

They were comrades in arms. Blood brothers. *You are and will always be one of us*.

He turned right onto Yasukuni Avenue. The night dwellers flocked there as if to watch a parade going by.

Returning the way he’d escaped three days before, Setsura thought about where Princess might be secluding herself, but couldn’t come up with any new ideas.

The *other* Takako had vanished from the Nuvenberg house as well. Kikiou had probably liberated her when he fled with Ryuuki. That she hadn’t gone on a killing rampage since was strange and a bit unsettling.

Passing beneath the Shinjuku overpass, he heard someone singing a sad melody. By the time he entered the ruins of the bus terminal at the west entrance of Shinjuku Station, it stopped. A warbling, reed-like voice rose up in its place, but that too soon vanished. Perhaps the sound of someone weeping.

He finally arrived at the boat. The ground moved beneath his feet. Without looking, he knew it was flowing water. The lighting poured out of the vessel here and there as if preparing to leave port.

“Where are you going?” a voice behind him called out.

He turned around. There was a man dressed in a tuxedo and a bow tie. Setsura could only imagine he worked at a hotel somewhere. Around him were many others, their red eyes glowing in the dark.

“I’m going up,” Setsura said with a jerk of his chin.

The man seized his shoulders, as if gripped by fear. “You are going to see the sire?”

Setsura set off without answering.

“She is a very frightening person. You won’t return. Neither you nor us.”

The voice chased after him. Setsura stopped in front of the lobby doors. Glancing up, the rising stone facade was absorbed into the night sky. He didn’t crouch or jump, but shot up and landed on top of the lobby and walked over to the vertical facade of the hotel.

A strange thing happened as soon as his toes touched the stone. Without falling over, the black clad figure stepped onto the side of the building. Standing perpendicular to it, he strode upwards as if walking along a road. The scene was enough to suggest that, struck by his commanding presence, gravity itself had become confused about which direction it should flow.

Arriving six hundred feet above the ground, Setsura vaulted over the railing and landed on the roof.

The surface was riven with cracks. The night wind wafted through the rubble. In the center of this desolate scene lay a naked woman on the ground.

Setsura ran over to her and called out her name. She didn't move. Her skin was unusually cold, though she continued to draw in thin breaths. She had not completely become a vampire.

He stood up and looked around him. "So here I am. Now what?"

The night wind sang out in answer, a single pluck of a string that brought Setsura to one knee.

"Like the legend of Rip Van Winkle—or in your case, Urashima Taro—shall I put you to sleep before the second act begins?"

The question came from the top of the stairwell leading up to the roof.

The Demon Princess stood there, *Silent Night* in her arms, her long black hair and gown fluttering in the breeze. The gown was slit all the way to the hips. Her thighs shone like polished porcelain in the moonlight.

"For three days you have anguished over her fate. It's written all over your face." She smiled a bewitching smile. Her glowing face was more like the moon high overhead.

"Yeah, and I'm sure that made your day." Setsura said with a jerk of his head, "So take a hike. That ship is getting ready to set sail.

Captain down to the deckhands, Kikiou's gotta be one busy boy. Who are the passengers?"

"There will be at least two going aboard, me and my new servant."

"Screw that."

"And how will you? I had forgotten about the *you* that is not you before, but not this time. I will now deliver your last kiss. Can you resist the music of *Silent Night*?"

She plucked the strings again. The notes rang out like pearls of sound. Setsura fell to both knees.

"Return Kanan-san."

"I can't do that. I did once. I won't twice. I will make her my maidservant before your eyes. And after, I will take hold of her true heart. My hand is as good as a stake of fresh wood. Hoh, you came here without any recourses, all for the sake of a woman, and to no avail."

She strummed the koto. The strings rang out. Setsura closed his eyes. Only for a moment, but when he looked again, Takako was in Princess's arms. A mere ten feet separated them.

The crimson lips sucked at her neck.

"Plead, Setsura. Beg. Become my servant for her sake. And when you do, you will learn to heel like a good puppy. Bend your knees and beg. Lick the soles of my feet."

"Princess," said Setsura, lifting his head.

“What?” Her voice broke into a smile of victory.

“What happened to Ryuuki?”

Her immediate answer was a look of surprise. Uncertainty flickered in her eyes. In that instant, *Silent Night* played out an altogether different tune. The strings broke one by one. And then as if pulled by invisible wires, Takako’s body flew out of Princess’s grasp and into Setsura’s arms.

A second later, Setsura had bounded to the edge of the roof. One more jump and flying through the air, he should be able to catch hold of one of the wires he’d left behind while climbing up here and safely make his escape.

Supporting the wires was the Shinjuku Station building, Yodobashi Camera at the west entrance, Nomura Securities Building, the Sumitomo Building, Shinjuku Police Headquarters, Kogakuin University, and a good hundred more. He wasn’t leaving anything to chance.

Setsura jumped.

To think she could stop that body in midair through the sheer force of will. As soon as Princess’s shining eyes glittered red and her gaze pierced his back, Setsura’s will became her own.

“Cast her aside and come back to me.”

To think that Setsura would comply. She gestured to him. He left Takako there and staggered towards her. Without another word, she placed her hand on his shoulders and tore open his black collar.

The pair of teeth marks pulsated there like a poisonous hickey. The fourth and final kiss would be planted there.

Setsura abruptly shifted the position of his head. Princess did not pull back her head reflexively, but burning with anger, pressed forward—as Setsura attached his lips to hers. Princess opened her mouth and beckoned in his tongue. In it came—but not what she had expected—a cool, refreshing liquid.

She swallowed. She didn't spit it out. After all, she had confidently informed him that no poison should be able to harm her. *Should be able to*—then what was this substance scorching her immortal body from the inside out?

Unleashing a wild cry, she tried to retreat. Two red lines crisscrossed her body, from the crown of her head down to her crotch, from the right side of her waist to the left.

A second later, the most beautiful woman in the world was transformed into four chunks of fresh meat that tumbled onto the concrete.

With a sigh, Setsura slumped to his knees. He reached up and felt the side of his neck. The accursed scars had faded to half their color and form.

"So half isn't enough?" Setsura murmured. "I guess I was bitten one time too many." He tossed the bottle in his hand to the ground.

Mephisto had given Setsura the bottle back when he was a vampire. The contents contained a drug that prevented vampiric transformation, something Princess would not have imagined coming

into play.

Setsura had never gone anywhere without it, and had drained it down while leaping from the building with Takako, swallowing half and saving the other half for Princess. He'd calculated that playing the bad boy would cause her to lose her temper, and she'd come after him before finishing off Takako.

On a night like this, in a contest like that, fair was foul, and foul fair.

By having his blood taken by Ryuuki, Mephisto had seen a path to perfecting a treatment appropriate to that level of vampire. He'd given it to Setsura instead of using it on himself, perhaps because of the strange world filled with mysterious wonders he saw then through the eyes of a vampire.

Though when it came to this doctor, it was always hard to tell the cart from the horse, whether the desire to become a vampire was principally another way to amass knowledge far beyond human understanding, or the only way to save the soul of Setsura Aki.

In any case, the drug saved Setsura in his moment of extremis, and seared the heart of the Demon Princess. That an anti-vampire compound would prove such a potent poison to this particular vampire was clear from the evidence. Drawn and literally quartered, the body of the Demon Princess showed no signs of reincarnating itself.

"I have to wonder if this will do the job. Maybe if I ground her up and burned her to ashes?" Setsura glanced down at Takako in his arms. "More importantly, taking care of her takes priority. Mephisto

or the cops should arrive any minute. I can't leave Princess here by herself."

Setsura took a credit card-sized cell phone from the breast pocket of his black shirt.

"Oh, what a curious device!"

Takako gleefully clapped her hands. The Takako that came wrapped in blue-white light, the alter-ego that escaped from the Nuvenberg house.

Takako reacted first. Snatching the other Takako from Setsura, she planted her hand against his sternum and pushed. Not hard, but he was thrown a dozen feet backwards.

He managed to roll with the impact but still landed hard on his back, eliciting a grunt of pain.

"My kindred spirit. It is only logical that I should take possession of her," Takako declared in sinister tones, holding the other Takako to her body. This was as well a scene of breathtaking beauty.

"Do you remember, Setsura-san? What I said when you grabbed me last? That I would tear you apart someday? Since I ran away from that house, I have been keeping my eye on your place and Mephisto Hospital. I kept quiet and waited for my chance to strike you down."

These words from the mouth of the woman with exactly the same face as Takako, that radiant smile no different from that of any college co-ed.

“And now that time has come. Your right hand first. Then your left. And then I’ll divide you in two like Princess-sama there.”

The corpse of the Demon Princess lay on the ground to Setsura’s right. He furrowed his brow. *In two*?

The blue light filled his field of view. The color quickly lost its intensity. The blackness flowed back around them. Blue Takako reeled backwards.

“Kikiou, eh?” came a voice above him.

More than the kaleidoscopic human figure coming to her feet, Setsura’s attention was drawn to the two Takakos, and ten feet away, a white-haired old man.

“Wow, good timing. You showed up at just the right time,” said the amazed Setsura.

There was nothing inherently “amazing” about this situation. This young man was somehow missing the gene for strained nerves.

“Those two are the products of Mephisto’s experimentation,” said the great warlock and scholar. Using a normal arm—he must have reattached a pair back in the ship—he jabbed a gnarled cane at Takako. “This must have been the only way of stopping her in the process of becoming one of Princess’s tribe. At least her other half remains intact. I came back here to see to it that you do not interfere again, and to that end I will make you whole.”

“No!” shouted the blue Takako. “No! No! I don’t want to go back! Please, old man. If you help me, I’ll do whatever you want.”

More than the desperate look in her sidelong glance, what caught Kikiou's attention were those words.

"You'll do *anything*?"

"Sure. Fuck me silly, if you want."

"Kill Setsura Aki."

"I intended to all along. You're the one who got in the way, old man."

"I had considered Princess there, but for now Setsura Aki will do."

"Fine with me. Hey, can I do it any way, using any method I want?"

"Suit yourself."

"Oh, boy! I really like you, old man."

Takako flashed her blue teeth and turned to Setsura.

A howl rent the night air first. "Kikiou, kill her!"

"Princess?" the old man cried out. "But—but—"

"Kill her!"

The menace rang out from Princess's clear voice. Faster than Takako could make sense of the developing situation, Kikiou's cane sank in between her full breasts. Blue Takako faded without a sound, and then disappeared, a wry smile on her lips.

"What of the girl?" Princess asked in primly satisfied tones.

“For all practical purposes, she will be the same as she always was. One of an infinite number of personas has disappeared. That is all. There should be no lasting effect on her body or soul.”

“Well then, good for her. Setsura, shall we pick up where we left off? To start with, we’ll make that girl your servant. You will drink her blood.”

“My my, the bitch is back, and thinking awfully high and mighty of herself.”

“Still with the name calling. Too bad you’ve used up your magic potion. The ship leaves soon. You will live forever in its hold dreaming wonderful dreams with me. Dreams of pleasure and ecstasy. Hoh. My victory is complete.”

Princess glided forward and fixed him in her gaze.

“Maybe next time,” Setsura said. “This dream looks like a freaking nightmare to me. Wouldn’t catch a wink sleeping next to a face like that.”

“What are you saying?”

Princess raised a hand to her cheek. She froze like a stone statue, as if Medusa had suddenly appeared before her. That heaven-blessed beauty had hideously melted away from half of her face.

Setsura couldn’t help imagining that white doctor smothering a private smile at that moment. Of course, he didn’t know that Mephisto had treated her after confessing his love for him, or that he had made sure that in the moment Princess’s victory seemed all but complete, the cure would crumble before her eyes.

“What—What is this? You tricked me, Mephisto!”

This cry of despair made the night catch its breath. Setsura couldn’t help furrowing his brow in pain. Kikiou stood there like a ramrod.

But Princess’s frenzy soon ended. As if admonished by the moonlight, she stopped in her tracks and whirled around to face Setsura.

“How ugly is this? Do you think me ugly, Setsura?”

At that moment, he didn’t have much of an opinion on the matter.

“Answer me! Please answer me!”

Something close to anguish filled her voice. Certainly no one had heard anything like it from her in the past four thousand years.

“I can’t honestly say I’m eager to look at you again,” Setsura said calmly.

The Demon Princess answered with equal alacrity and serenity. “Of course. Makes sense. Yet I am sure I can make others my own, this face notwithstanding. You’re different, Setsura.”

“Really?” This young man aspired to remain calm, cool and collected, twenty-four seven, a dormant butterfly tucked inside its chrysalis until called into action.

“I met you in a room in Mephisto Hospital, and—” Princess stopped mid-sentence. “No, fine. But I cannot stand this face. I cannot forgive this face. I cannot make you mine with this face!”

“What are you saying, Princess!” Kikiou cried out in a strangled

rage perfectly appropriate to the situation. “Drink his blood! Make him your servant! The two of you and I will hold this city, and then the whole world, in the palms of our hands. If you cannot, then kill him! Kill Setsura Aki!”

“Is it all right if I kill you, Setsura?”

“Whatever spins your pinwheel,” he said with a shrug.

“You really don’t give a damn, do you? Mark my words, the time will come when I will eat you.”

The great vampiress spun around.

“Princess!”

“We are going. Kikiou, make the ship ready to depart.”

“We can’t. This is our only true home. Only Demon City Shinjuku can make our dreams come true. If we leave here, we must inevitably be eternal wanderers. That cannot be. That simply cannot be.”

At that moment, a commotion swept up the street below, cresting over the railing like a tide and spilling across the roof. From the chorus of voices, one stood out in particular.

“*Destroy her*.” The waves of sound crashed again. “*Destroy. Destroy. Destroy*.”

Princess perched nimbly atop the railing and stared down at the ground. The squirming mass of humans circled the hotel, looking up at her. Their eyes all glowed red.

“*She is there*.”

The words spread like a current. Hands reached toward the sky, the fingers themselves seeming to speak.

"*Destroy the sire*."

"*Destroy her*."

"*Destroy her*."

"So my servants have finally been roused to action," Princess observed calmly. "And they cry out to kill me. The Hsia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties—it was the same there too. It started with the high and mighty, but in the end my servants and slaves were the ones calling for my death. This is the end. Kikiou, supposing I wished to carry out your vision, it becomes impossible with no one here to carry out my commands."

"*Destroy her*."

"*Destroy the sire*."

The cries billowed up like an evil miasma, stained by the colors of an infinite loathing. She had created her minions from the citizens of this city and then cruelly dispatched them with the same whimsy. This was their accursed coup d'état against her.

A heartbroken Kikiou slumped to his knees. This old man, the first and last hope for Shinjuku's triumphal vampiric transformation, was seeing his dreams dashed before his eyes.

"Let's go," said Princess.

Kikiou pressed his cane against Takako's throat.

"Are you disobeying me, Kikiou?"

“Disobey? I am!” the old man shouted, gritting his teeth. The defiance called out from his very blood. “This once I will turn my back on you. That dark star that turned my plans to dust—I shall not depart this world leaving him behind unscathed! I will never rest until he tastes the dregs of our despair, even if it be one ten-thousandth of our pain and anguish. And this girl’s life is the first place to start.”

The sturdy shaft of wood bit into her white throat. The cane split neatly in two—Kikiou’s body lifted into the air and sailed over the railing—it was hard to tell which happened first.

The Demon Princess listened entranced as Kikiou’s screams faded into the distance below them. She reached her hand to her throat. “Why leave this intact, Setsura?” she asked. “You didn’t save Takako, but punished the traitor who turned against me. Go ahead and cut away. The results will always be the same.”

Holding one end of the invisible wire, the beautiful silhouette stood there, not moving, as if transfixed by the moon.

“I’ll be going then. After giving my servants below a taste of my own medicine, I will set forth on a long, long voyage. I won’t return until after you are dead. At that time I will bring Kikiou’s prophesies to pass and build him his citadel. *Adieu*.”

In that moment, Princess’s head flew into the air. The story would be told from that moment on that another pretty half-moon was painted in the sky.

Like a fountain of fresh black ink, her blood erupted upwards. The headless torso balanced a moment longer on the railing, swayed

in the manner of a woman too drunk to catch herself, pitched forward, and was swallowed up by the darkness.

Once upon a time, foretelling her own destruction, the Demon Princess had told Setsura that she would die only when she had lost the will to live. Knowing that moment had come, and allowing Setsura's attack to proceed—there was no way to truly comprehend what manner of mind she possessed.

Shinjuku was no less a Demon City to demons.

"It is over." Mephisto's voice came from the stairwell behind him.

Setsura didn't turn around. "How long have you been there."

"I am sure you noticed."

Setsura didn't answer. The two approached the steel railing and looked down at the world below.

"The ship is on the move," Setsura said.

The white foam rose on the road, covering the feet of the retreating figures assembled there. The road became a canal and the ghost ship set sail. It turned left at the intersection and headed back to the world from which it came.

Kikiou stood on the bow of the ship. Next to him, the exquisite limbs and head were laid out in the manner of a pious offering.

With the fallen Takako in his arms, Mephisto looked down from the railing just as the ship turned past the Mitsui Building. Kikiou glanced up and called out to them.

"What did he say?" Setsura asked.

“Hmm,” Mephisto answered.

“Like, see you around sometime?”

“Hmm,” Mephisto said. He glanced at Setsura’s neck. “I couldn’t make out what he said at first, but I think he said you look awfully worn out.”

He would have continued but clammed up. His one weak spot, the lips of that strikingly cool countenance moved and the verses reached his ears.

Crossing the waters we’ve crossed before

Seeing the flowers we’ve seen once more

Spring breezes along the river bank roads

Before we know it, we’ve made our way home

He added, “We’ll have to hope they don’t drop by again anytime soon.”

Setsura had greeted this same ship upon its arrival, and with the same verses. By the time his final farewell reached the ground, the roads were dry again. As if taking those words as a signal, the people there on the street trudged off into the dark to the streets and the houses they called their own.

Original Volume VII Afterword

The other day, a novel featuring the same white doctor so prominently featured in *Yashakiden: The Demon Princess* was published. I was signing books at a department store in Yokohama.

That day I received quite a shock. Because Toya-san happens to inhabit the place. (A more precise term than "live," believe me.)

Thankfully, no suspicious shadows bulged out from the line of fans, and the signing proceeded in an orderly fashion. Then in the afternoon, I found myself greeted by four girls who looked like college co-eds. They smiled at me in a manner that said another shoe was about to drop.

Huh? I couldn't help thinking.

"This girl is the one who sent Mr. T the letter." They pointed to the girl wearing the glasses on the end.

Ah, Mr. T and that letter. No more needs to be said about *that*. The woman who'd written him in the afterword mentioned in a previous volume. The stationery and the handwriting had both struck me as that of an adult woman (a compliment!), a supposition that had apparently led me in the wrong direction.

(Incidentally, the inclusion of a telephone number just to make me jealous seemed a scam on his part, and the photograph was actually of his girlfriend. What kind of man am I dealing with here?)

The girl has contributed quite consistently to the reader's corner

in *The Lion* magazine (Asahi Sonorama Publications), where a manga I'm writing is appearing (lots of resemblances). Every time she sends something in, it gets printed. Little gems within an already fine work. That's why I recognized her name.

The girls and I went our separate ways, all smiles. No matter what the world, the human smile is as necessary as air.

Describing this incident to Mr. T later, he opened his eyes a bit wider and said, "Huh, I always thought it was a young lady."

His eyes sparkled. And no wonder. College co-eds, after all. Apparently he favored youth over experience.

The assumption that Mr. T had addressed his "love letter" (see the previous installments in this story) to the aforementioned co-ed turned out to be off the mark. But since then, more letters have come his way, overflowing with feeling. It got to the point where: "There's talk of starting a fan club for me."

By the way, no mention of the young lady in question starting a fan club for *me*. Just to screw with him, I put my foot down and said, "No way."

Well, then.

Whenever it comes time to write another installment for Non Novels, Mr. T and I decamp to a summer resort on the outskirts of Tokyo and set to work. A hotel in the city would be fine with me. But everybody at Shodensha says that once it gets past noon, the well goes dry.

In a nutshell, I'm packed off to a desert island with a guard

standing over me. Have these people no respect for human dignity? That's not necessarily why, but I have the strong sense that my pleasant trip is about to end. In fact, Seisaku Yoshida has something to do with this, though in any case, risk always attends the resort writer (I can't go into the reasons here, but according to Mr. T, Seisaku Yoshida is "sexy").

Yashakiden finishes in the next volume (really). Granted, it's too soon to start getting sentimental, but I truly feel that we've come a long way together.

I apologize to my readers, who might in some small way be experiencing similar emotions, but take heart. The structure of a new adventure with Setsura and Mephisto is already taking shape. I'll start writing it the day after the serialization is put to bed. I'll make it ten volumes this time (no, just kidding).

When it comes to *Maohden*, *Demon City Blues* and *Double-Faced Demon*, my reaction is more muted. They have come to the end of their runs. What happens after this cannot be written.

What happens *next*. What comes *after this*. That's what writing is always about.

Time flows inexorably towards tomorrow.

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching Pet Cemetery)

June 16, 1991

Original Volume VIII Afterword

Yashakiden: The Demon Princess has concluded its journey. I deeply appreciate all the readers who spent the time to make the trip with me. This afterword brings us to the end of that road.

These are the people who made it possible for me to write *Yashakiden*. To briefly sum up: Mr. N, the editor in chief at Non Novels who okayed the serialization in thirty-seven installments.

My editor, Mr. T, who put up with my attitude, my moods, my flights of procrastination, and faithfully and diligently watched over me and pestered me tit for tat.

Mr. I, who suffered through all the troublesome revisions and saw the book through to publication.

My *senpai*, Kyushu University's Assistant Professor H, who found words of praise for this work alone.

Manga Artist A, who always offered criticism in the gentlest terms.

Mr. T's lifelong rival, Mr. W from company K, who never failed to cheer him up, while spurring him on to the next manuscript deadline.

And more than anybody, the illustrator, Jun Suemi, who has labored patiently over these past four years without a single complaint, exercising an imagination to make my hair stand on end.

And, of course, all my readers.

Oh, that reminds me. Bubbling into my thoughts when I'm dead on my feet, accompanied by bursts of laughter, stirring the pot of my writerly inspiration, the love of my life, Toya-san.

I know I've said it before, but *Yashakiden* currently stands as my best, and longest, piece of work. There were, of course, many twists and turns getting there.

I promise a hundred and twenty pages and, finishing fifteen, send Mr. T back to the publisher staring into space.

Due to a series of unfortunate events, I don't get home on time, and Mr. T, left out in the freezing cold, calls me from a nearby laundromat and says, "Next time I'm bringing soap and a towel" (there's a public bath next to the laundromat).

There's been talk of an anime series featuring Setsura Aki, but I've turned them all down. I may be the one writer in the world harboring such a dislike for the medium (manga is different, as the choice of an artist may be settled in advance).

But when other jobs were getting me down, and another *Yashakiden* loomed, strangely enough, my mood improved. I'm not kidding (really, I'm not, Mr. T). That's how attached I've become to the characters in this story.

I had actually mapped out the last scene several years before. Writing it, I uncharacteristically thought to myself, *Ah, so this day has finally come*.

And one more thing I don't usually say.

Everything that has gone into this story, as I've described, must now be poured into the further adventures of the black-clad P.I. and the white doctor. That is the only way I can think of thanking you.

I promise that we will meet again soon. I'm looking forward to it.

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching Bride of Dracula) October 11, 1991

Omnibus Afterword

I've just finished reading the eight volumes of the paperback pocket edition of *Yashakiden: The Demon Princess*.

I have a hard time talking about my actual writing, but I can say it now: this is Hideyuki Kikuchi's most powerful work, and of the two hundred some odd books I have written, contending to be ranked as my best.

(Warring with the opinions of my readers, who will come to their own conclusions in that respect.)

Yashakiden was born out of what has since become a worldwide infatuation with vampires. There is the belief that an artist is born to create a particular work of art. Call it fate, and I'll say I came into this world to write about an otherworldly genie wrapped in black.

I've written about this before, but the one thing that fostered my fascination with vampires more than anything else was a single movie, the 1958 production of *Dracula* from Hammer Films, running only eighty-one minutes.

The six-foot-three Christopher Lee plays the Count of Transylvania, and like the original, never wears anything but black.

That is why my first vampire novel, *Vampire Hunter D* (or rather, my first novel about a vampire *hunter*), featured a man in black.

I've touched on this before as well, but the character in the movie I find myself empathizing with the most is not Count Dracula, but

Doctor Van Helsing, played by Peter Cushing.

When I was in fifth grade, I was still drawn more to the light of wisdom than the monsters of the night, to good more than evil. While I say that I prefer vampires, accursed beings, and ghosts and goblins as my superheroes, it's because in the end, that same ordinary sense of justice still rules.

As I've grown older, my affection for the otherworldly has grown stronger. My long-held dream of creating a vampire hero, arising out of those dark and evil mists, finally came to fruition in *Vampire Hunter D*, albeit with a bit of a twist.

Perhaps due to a deep-seated and lingering fear toward the monstrous, the protagonist, D, was not a "true" vampire, but remained half-human. I named his fierce antagonist Count Magnus Lee. *Dracula* still held me in its thrall.

Ever since Christopher Lee's depiction of Dracula was etched on my soul, my pen has traced his outlines.

Tall, lean and refined, and yet turning into a ferocious and ruthless predator and destroying his opponents when the rock meets the hard place. Clothed in black, shunning the light and haunting the night, his only true abode. In particular, those sharp and bitter and often bitingly humorous words, disconnected from the mundane world, issuing at times from those bloodless lips.

And—this a personal preference and a "service" to my readers—possessed of beauty. A person is his face. The same goes for magic and evil. What's inside should come later.

Applying these ideas to *Yashakiden* must have raised elementary questions in the reader's mind.

Even if I clad Princess all in black, she nevertheless hails from Asia and isn't exactly known for her sense of humor. And, of course, she's a *she*. The European General Bey, bearing the blood of Dracula in his veins, also differs considerably from my "ideal" of a vampire.

The answer is—Setsura Aki.

My child of Dracula isn't Princess or General Bey. It's Setsura. He doesn't drink blood. But he doesn't need to. Setsura is the direct descendant of my Dracula, the "grown up" version of D. D's beauty, ruthlessness and gentleness, and dressed in black—I distilled all those qualities into a *senbei* shop owner in Demon City.

Princess, General Bey, Gento Roran, Galeen Nuvenberg, Yoshiko "*Urp*" Toya—it is only natural that they all be drawn to him.

In any case, Demon City Shinjuku does make an ideal stage for storytelling. And I have to say it comes together quite nicely (though the original credit goes to John Carpenter's *Escape from New York*).

Old-fashioned black capes, blindingly handsome young men, overly dramatic monologues, beautiful women with skin like pearls sailing ancient ships, pale-faced men and women attending black-tie affairs, coffins hidden in the basements of western-style houses—nothing is out of bounds or off the table.

A city where a sports car rocketing down Shinjuku Avenue passes a black carriage pulled by six horses coming the other way and nobody bats an eye.

I believe the vampire story has become the modern version of the epic romance, in the classical sense. And for an epic romance, the right stage is necessary. That's why I've said that I created Demon City Shinjuku in order to write *Yashakiden*.

That conviction hasn't changed.

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching Dracula)

September 30, 1997

Of Monsters and Metropolises by Mari Kotani

Yashakiden: The Demon Princess is a captivating work of urban fantasy.

Hideyuki Kikuchi made his debut in 1982 with the publication of *Demon City Shinjuku*. In that first novel, an imagination rooted in the magic of the metropolis had already begun to express itself. And has not stopped flowing since.

From the 1980s up till now, fantasy based in an urban setting has flourished in Europe and the United States. Constructed with the blessings of contemporary science, the hope was that these glittering new cities would greet the new century and race forward into the future.

These dreams dashed, the scene is now one of that accumulated knowledge and everything they spawned gathering dust and decaying away in a miasma rising from the ruins like a perpetual fog.

The city has become like an ancient temple or monastery, wrapped in a mysterious, transcendental state of being.

Our high-tech culture gave birth to the information society, whose hardware took over our urban spaces in the blink of an eye, changing our perspective of the future along with our view of the present. At the same time, the fantasy world since the 1980s has often seen the city itself depicted as the implicit personification of

supernatural phenomena.

Whether ghosts of the dead clinging to a primitive perspective, or events bound by karmic relationships to the past, they imagine indivisible existences, intertwined with those persistent passions and sentiments, calling forth demons within and without.

You might have had the experience of suddenly noticing that among the streets and alleyways a strange warp in the air has opened its maw, and what you believed was a bustling amusement quarter appears to you as a desolate landscape.

And not a simple vacant lot, but ruins transformed into a world filled to the brim with monsters and demons. Narrative works of all ages and cultures have documented this transfiguration of the urban landscape, though one with as grotesque and violent a world view as that offered by Demon City is rare.

The allure of Demon City is tied to the imaginative power of Shinjuku itself. Shinjuku as the "urban." Shinjuku as the "stage." The real Shinjuku turned into a demonic realm. While an entirely imaginary place, here and there where this city of the new century invades its ghostly precincts, we can expand upon the accumulated meaning of those reflections and reverberations.

In *The Dramaturgy of the City* (Kobundo, 1987), the sociologist Shunya Yoshimi discusses the city as it correlates with eras and ages. He offers Shinjuku as a model of the 1960s, and touches upon the four unique characteristics that it imbues: vigorously assimilative; forward thinking; self-transformative; and possessed by a sense of "being in this together."

It is no exaggeration to say that, even now, Yoshimi's sociological analysis of Shinjuku explains well the world view of Demon City that Kikuchi has been writing about since 1982. This "Shinjuku" rose out of the rail lines that converged there, swallowing up the influx of people from the surrounding areas, and step by step inventing itself.

And in the process inventing a distinct and fertile "Shinjuku culture": a jumbled mixture of all the regional cultures around it, fermenting one hybrid after the other, bursting forth in luxuriant growth, revealing at last the structure of the "proto-Shinjuku metropolis."

Shinjuku at the beginning of the 1980s, or more specifically, the Shinjuku at the moment of Demon City's creation, itself inspired by *Escape from New York* (which, it should be pointed out, had stolen a march on the whole cyberpunk milieu)—that Shinjuku had already ceded its sense of the "now" to Shibuya.

With the arrival of the consumer culture in the 1980s, the jumbled hybrid culture that made Shinjuku the center of attention during the 1960s was supplanted by Shibuya's fashion scene.

Shinjuku at the moment of Demon City's creation was perhaps a space sealed up together with the dreams of the 1960s, making it, in a way, a depiction of the ruins of the 1960s culture.

So perhaps, by analogy, it can be said that during the 1970s, about the same time the place called "Shinjuku" was surpassed by Shibuya and so separated itself from the *zeitgeist*, it began its journey into the demon realms.

And ruins are where monsters will always find a room to call their own. *Yashakiden* illustrates another of Kikuchi's main themes, placing that vampire imagery within the large temple sanctuary that Shinjuku has become.

The story begins with the arrival of an unusual demoness and her vampire brood in Demon City Shinjuku from China and its heralded five thousand years of history and civilization. Although "made in China," this decadent band has appeared here and there in world history, and now toys with Shinjuku as a child torments a fly.

The citizens of the city, beginning with Setsura Aki, have no choice but to get up close and personal and face off against them.

The objective of these vampires seems to come down to ruling Shinjuku. But not necessarily. Beginning with Princess and her whimsies; the mad scientist that is Kikiou; Ryuuki and his feelings for Princess; Shuuran, with her crush on Ryuuki—when the city assimilates them, the changes begin to emerge.

With the city and the outsider, the effects go both ways. The processes by which the fantastic and the grotesque replenish Shinjuku's imaginative powers and are absorbed into Demon City are felt down to the cellular level.

The city and the outsider—it's the quintessential Shinjuku story: to reject or to incorporate; to become an offshoot or an appendage. This meeting, this collision of cultures, richly mingles with all the attendant nuances. Thought of that way, the striking black and white combination—Setsura Aki and Mephisto—only deepens the curiosity and the questions.

The slightly "retro" occupations of *senbei* shop owner and private investigator Setsura. Doctor Mephisto, the Demon Physician who can cure any disease. Setsura with the ability to cut anything into pieces, and Mephisto with the ability to put those pieces back together again.

Known equally in Demon City for their comely countenances, when the demonic realms disgorge some new creature and the city swallows it up, their complementary talents to disassemble and reassemble kick into high gear. And through their mutual touch, those foreign monsters become naturalized citizens of the city.

The year 1997 marked the hundredth anniversary of the publication of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. As Hideyuki Kikuchi has frequently noted, *Dracula* has had an enormous effect on his life and career. It's hard to miss the parallels with the foreigner Count Dracula visiting London at the end of the last century.

Needless to say, there is a surprisingly deep literary perspective lurking in the background of this novel.

The monsters of this city aren't simply stuck with the label "vampire" because they hail from some unknown quarter. They spring forth from deep strata of established culture.

Dracula arrived in London in a dashing fashion, and coming from where Eastern Europe crossed into Asia, was himself the personification of a nineteenth-century version of internationalism and globalization. Princess and her cohorts make a great display of their past five thousand years of accumulated information.

The overriding nuance here though, is less the usual behavior of

ghosts and goblins and more the construction of an artificial environment based on the acquisition of technical expertise, and to a rather excessive degree at that.

Beginning with Kikiou, who is revealed to have an android body, showing the extent to which literary monsters have become connected to the technological imagination. In other words, these demons that escape easy classification are, more than anything, the product of our own manmade inventiveness.

And so the city appears before us in the pages of this book, the dramatic blending of monsters and machines.

The other day, the hundredth anniversary of Count Dracula's "birth" was celebrated with the publication of *Blood* (Hayakawa Books), an anthology of vampire stories. On the very first reading, the impact of Kikuchi's contribution, "An Irreplaceable Existence," raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

The reverberations in the literary world arising from the high-tech revolution of the 1980s have of course been felt across the science fiction spectrum, from the fantasy to the horror genres. However, those more polished descriptions emerging in the 1990s could yet be discerned in that same work.

A beautiful mechanical doll tossed onto a scrap heap of iron. The unmistakable nature of the pair of symmetrical holes puncturing the lustrous metal skin of her throat—the eerie aura raised by the introduction alone escapes easy description.

I can only recommend that you read this gem of a story. Weaving a nineteenth-century steampunk graveyard together with today's

postmodern high tech landscape unmistakably echoes and extends the kind of speculative thought that went into chimerical beings that come to life in *Yashakiden*.

Within the works of Hideyuki Kikuchi spring to life extraordinary imaginative worlds that even voracious writers of cyperpunk and techno-chic rarely come into contact with.

Yashakiden describes a monster metropolis while examining the world at the end of the century. Appearing at a rare millennial turning point, this urban epic has become a monster of a novel in its own right.

Mari Kotani

YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝
THE DEMON PRINCESS

YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝

THE DEMON PRINCESS 5
OMNIBUS EDITION

"This is the masterpiece of all vampire works I have ever created. I strongly believe that it's better than Vampire Hunter D."

-HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

The vampirization of Demon City Shinjuku is nearly complete. Princess, the legendary evil vampire from ancient China, and her followers Kikiou and Ryuuki have unleashed the plague of vampirism upon the already debauched and depraved city on the edge of the abyss. As more and more of Shinjuku's citizens turn into creatures of the night, a secret government plan is hatched to annihilate Demon City with a nuclear device.

As the clock ticks down, beautiful manhunter Setsura Aki enters Princess's kingdom to retrieve Princess's hostage — the Prime Minister of Japan. There he meets a mysterious mask maker from a bygone era and undergoes a transformation. But will it be in time to save Shinjuku?

Meanwhile, the Demon Physician, Doctor Mephisto, remains a voluntary prisoner in Princess's camp. To what end and whose side is the good doctor truly on?

And in Shinjuku's Magic Town, Tonbeau Nuvenberg and the Doll Girl find the portal to Princess's kingdom — a box sealed by magic. To open the box, they must do the impossible: access the timeline of the Universe itself — the Akashic Records.

The thrilling conclusion to the great vampire series, Yashakiden: The Demon Princess — by the master of Japanese horror fiction — Hideyuki Kikuchi.

From acclaimed Japanese horror writer Hideyuki Kikuchi (Vampire Hunter D, the Wicked City series) comes his next big novel series for the English-language audience: Yashakiden: The Demon Princess. With over two million copies sold in Japan and set in the popular Wicked City universe, this multi-volume series is not to be missed by followers of Kikuchi's works, as well as fans of horror and the macabre.

NOVEL /FANTASY / HORROR US $19.95

More titles available at www.akadot.com

ISBN 978-1-56970-198-0
51995
9 781569 701980

DIGITAL MANGA PUBLISHING
dmpbooks.com

Become our fan on Facebook
Digital Manga Inc.
Follow us on Twitter
@DigitalManga